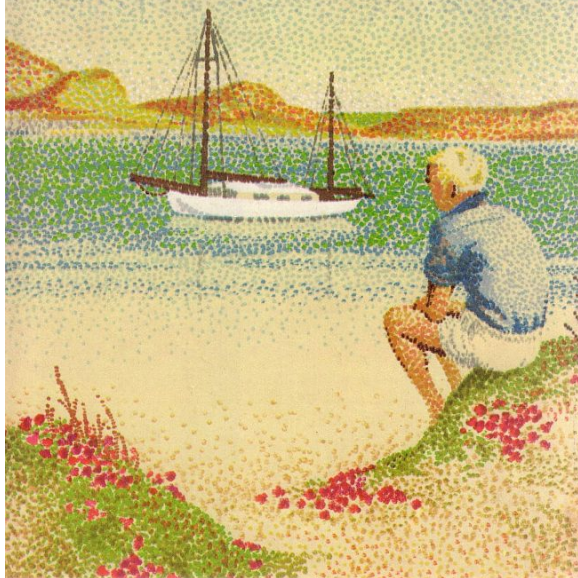


Lawrence G. Green

A Giant in Hiding



A GIANT IN HIDING

The life story of Frank Armstrong Wightman - cable operator, sailor,
naturalist, author, archaeologist and hermit.

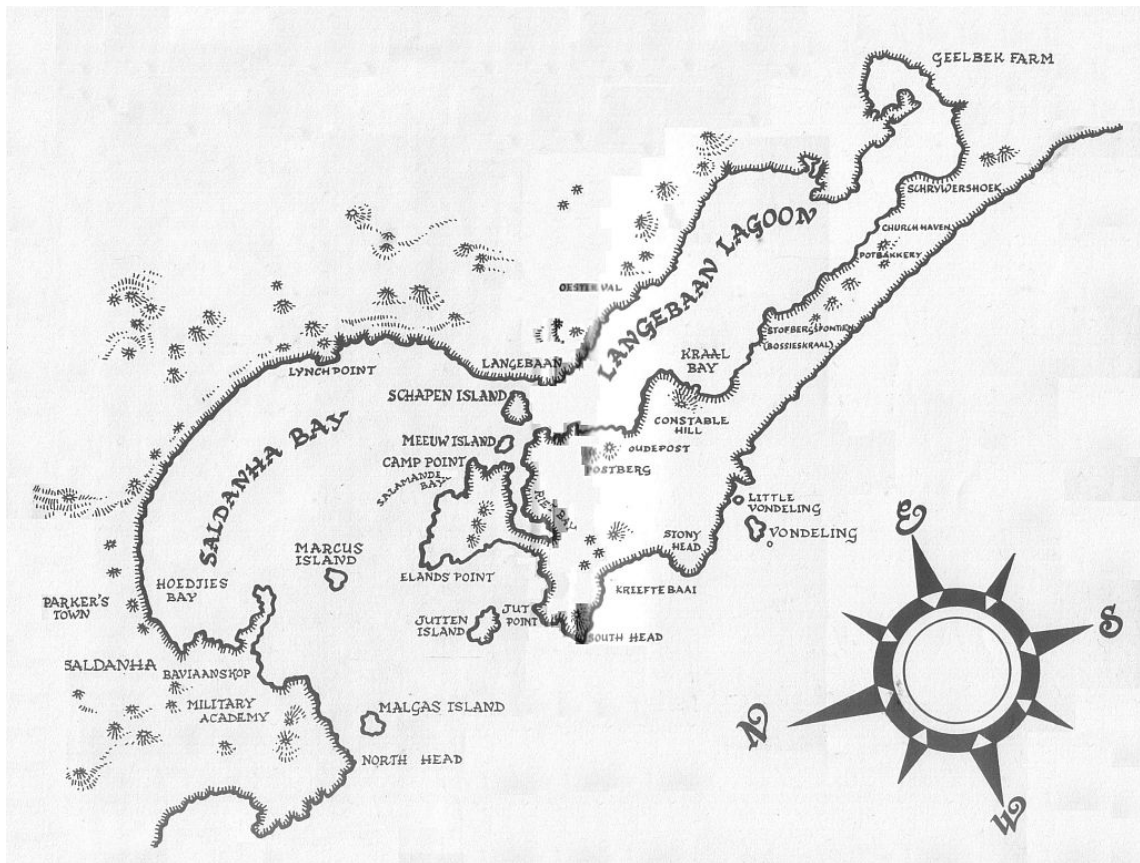
LAWRENCE G. GREEN

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ILLUSTRATIONS

Frank Wightman as a young cable operator in South America in 1915.

Frank Wightman in 1964, shortly before he sold *Wylo*. (Photo: Brian Lello.)

“The yacht club rented the clock tower, a tall building that had once been a signal station.”

“Frank picked the *Birkdale* because she was faster than the others ... a record breaker in her time, a lovely three-masted barque.”

Frank Wightman beside *Wylo* on the Royal Cape Yacht Club slipway.

Frank Wightman in the dory he built at Oude Raapkraal and used on the lagoon. (Photo: Brian Lello.)

At the end of exactly twelve months the yacht was launched ... Frank named the yacht *Wylo* after the sailing ship in one of Longfellow's poems.” (Photo: John R. Hagens.)

Frank Wightman on the deck of *Wylo* in January 1950, when he returned from the United States by steamer with his yacht. (Photo: Die Burger.)

“Gaze southwards from the South Head of Saldanha and you come to the unbroken beach that Frank Wightman called Sixteen-Mile Beach. On this lonely beach there was always driftwood whitened by sea and sand.

“Sixteen-Mile Beach is like the world before man appeared. Here the sea beats with the thunder heard

before man started his pitiful
little journey down the ages.”
(The author in foreground.)

Frank Wightman in the Bushman cave
known as Heerelgement, to the
north of Saldanha. Explorers and
travellers since 1712 have
carved their names in the cave.

Graham Young (left) and Frank
Wightman - a reunion on board
Wylo on the lagoon in 1954.
(Photo: David van Heerden.)

“July, and more flowers are breaking
the surface in tiny eruptions of
colour. Low on the earth are the
vygies, clusters of succulent
mesembs ... Soon the veld will
be aflame.”

Oesterval farm buildings in 1848,
when M. Brink was the owner.

(From the drawing by J. C.
Poortermans.)

Oesterval is probably the oldest farm
on the shores of Saldanha Bay.
Frank Wightman at the well.

“So he went back once more to
Oesterval, to the great lawn, to
the old buildings, the homestead
and the outhouses bending their
heads together over their
memories.”

“This is a sun-bleached desolation
without shade,” said Frank. “Not
a thumbnail of shade. You feel
like an ant on a griddle.”

Frank Wightman at Oesterval in
October 1969, with the lagoon
just behind him and Constable
Hill in the distance.

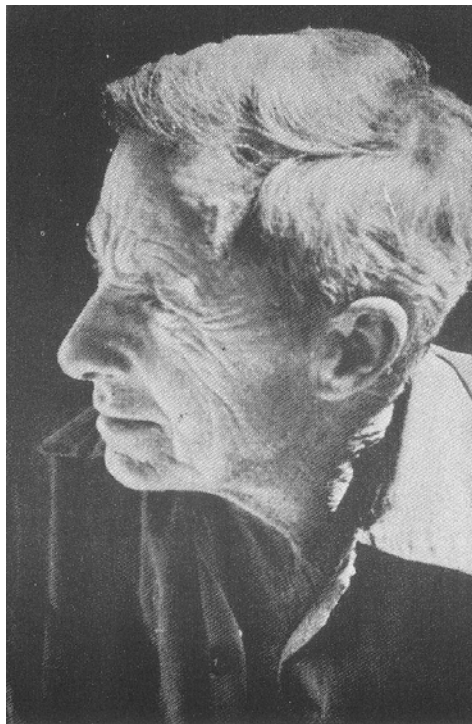
“Brian Lello had placed a huge, old-fashioned anchor outside his quarters ... This was a picturesque group of white buildings at Oesterval, unspoilt, a return to the eighteenth century.”

Frank Wightman in the old seamen's graveyard at Salamander Bay. (See appendix: Salamander Bay.)

Frank Wightman on board the hulk of the S.S. Karatara at Donkergat Whaling Station. (See appendix: *Donkergat*.)



Frank Wightman as a young cable operator in
South America in 1915



Frank Wightman in 1964, shortly before he
sold *Wyro*

CHAPTER 1

THE GOLDEN HARBOUR

*Did you voyage all unspoken, small and
lonely?*

*Or with fame, the happy fortune of the
few?*

*So you win the Golden Harbour, in the old
way;*

*There's the old sea welcome waiting there
for you.*

RONALD A. HOPWOOD.

FOR SEVEN months he had been living alone on board his little yacht. Friends had warned him that he would be lonely. In reality the charm of the place was so tremendous that at times he could feel the strokes of his leaping heart. He had not yet learned to live with himself but never had he known the living death of loneliness. The experience was gripping him; this great panorama of country near the

southern tip of South Africa was holding him spellbound. Here he was living not in a period but in all the centuries.

High summer now and the dunes that had been covered with wild flowers seven months ago were a glaring white. Sometimes the lagoon country became a stinging wilderness of blown sand; yet the hermit welcomed the strong south-east gales because of the discoveries he made afterwards. He was able to peer down the long corridors of time, gathering stone flakes in such rough shapes that he could almost glimpse the man-apes using them. One day, he thought, a pattern would emerge and after ten years, twenty years, he might know a little more. Already he had found traces of the Strandlopers, the primitive beachcombers who had

roamed this coastline. They had left their flint harpoons on a headland, their shell middens and bones; they had trapped fish in tidal corrals and feasted on seals and dead whales.

He had a much sharper vision of the Bushmen, the little hunters who had entered this vast scene with bows and arrows and a deep knowledge of poisons. Though they came long ago, the last survivors were still hiding in the caves of the hinterland within living memory. Down the coast during one of his long walks he had uncovered a flat slab of stone with a human figure painted in red ochre. Curiously he had lifted the stone and there lay the hunter; a tiny skeleton lying on one side, knees drawn up to the breast, hands covering the face. All the man's worldly possessions lay beside him; bow and arrows, skinning

blade, bored digging stone, fish spear and clay pot. The hermit had re-buried the hunter and passed on into another phase of the lagoon story.

Kraal Bay, the chart called the bay where his yacht lay moored. Once the Hottentots had lived there, a clan of tawny, ugly flat-nosed people in rawhide cloaks, smeared with grease, wearing sandals. A superior people, for though they never tilled the soil they owned oxen with long horns and humps and sheep with long ears, sheep built like greyhounds but with enormous tails. Moreover they worked with various metals and wore copper beads in their ears. Many relics of the Hottentot kraal remained in the sands of Kraal Bay for the hermit to collect when the fierce winds dropped.

On the hilltop, above Kraal Bay, scanning the wide South Atlantic, he

imagined the procession of ships that had passed this way. Explorers came in from the deep ocean when they saw the gannets and other birds of the coast. Stalks of kelp fifty feet long, like trumpets with roots, broke away from the rocks inshore and drifted seawards to guide the mariners. As they neared the shore they often sighted hippo from the rivers, seagoing hippo gazing at the intruders. Had the Phoenicians reached this coast in their galleys? The hermit often wondered whether they had landed in the autumn and sown these fields, waited for the harvest and sailed on to pass the Pillars of Hercules at last. It may have been true but they had vanished without trace. Galleons had come this way with gilded sterns and tiers of guns; corvettes and frigates, privateers and pirates. Skippers from

all the great seafaring nations had careened their ships on the shores of the lagoon. They had set up tents for their sick close to Kraal Bay and treated men suffering from scurvy, fever and dysentery with red berries as large as gooseberries, with sorrel and nourishing roots. This was a paradise for sea-weary crews. Here they mended and hooped their provision casks and water barrels. Here they dried cargoes damaged by leaks, pumped their ships dry, heeled them and caulked the leaks. Here they set up forges, washed their linen, sounded their drums and traded with the Hottentots. They gave bread and cloth and the natives brought them ivory and ostrich feathers and the honey that was found under bushes. For a mirror, two knives or a little bell the first explorers received an ox or several fat-

tailed sheep; but soon they had to give more for such meat. Yes, those old crews loved the lagoon. They drank rum and gin out of flagons and other strong bottles and left much romantic glassware for the hermit to find. Some gave the Hottentots wine, listened to the reed flutes and watched the women dancing; the women with peppercorn hair and fine white teeth, regarded by the sailors as well-featured and more pleasing than the brutish men. But when the Hottentot men and women talked no one could understand them. They spoke with clicks and gutturals like turkeys gobbling, and years passed before the sharpest wit could learn a word of the language.

Such was Kraal Bay and the lagoon three or four centuries before the hermit brought his yacht into the half-moon of sand and scrub. Those old

explorers and traders repaired their sails there and took in firewood. They carved inscriptions on boards and engraved stones and left their letters in tarred cloth or in bottles hung on poles. Their padres held services on the beach and then they sailed away refreshed. And when the salt ocean bit into them again they remembered fondly the fragrant herbs and sweet-smelling shrubs of Kraal Bay, the plants that had reminded them of the mints and scabious of their homelands.

Now the hermit swung his eyes round the enormous harbour. It was shaped like a fish hook, or a question mark, or perhaps a human ear. No wonder the old navigators had found safe anchorage in Saldanha Bay. He thought it must be the finest harbour in the world. Offshore lay the sealing rocks. Close to the northern entrance

was an island where the white gannets dived on the fish shoals like machine-gun bullets spattering the water. Within the southern entrance stood another bird haunt, standing well out of the sea with a guano-whitened ridge in the centre. He knew the place for he had landed there and seen the cormorants making their nests of sticks and seaweed. Jackass penguins crouched in shallow holes. Gulls had flown round his head and swooped on unguarded nests to feast on eggs and chicks. Outside the great bay like a foundling on the doorstep rose another island, half a mile offshore, fringed with rocks, a safe breeding-ground for penguins and wild pigeons. His eyes fell upon the two lagoon islands between the blue waters of the bay and the long shallow green lagoon. One of them lay close to a whaling station

where a dark patch of deep water formed a contrast with the lighter stretches of the lagoon. This island had grass and bushes like the veld and it attracted many land birds; plovers and sandpipers, greenshanks, whimbrels and swallows. The other island had a tiny beach and a good anchorage where he had sheltered when the south-easter was tearing down the lagoon. Rock doves, gulls and cormorants nested there. He also remembered the cobras and puff adders in the long grass. It was a round island, swarming with alien rabbits left there by seamen. These white rabbits had survived the snakes and lived there for centuries, safe from the jackals of the mainland.

Hour after hour he lingered there on the hilltop taking in the grand curve of the great bay. He saw fishing fleets in

the northern arm, distant fish canning factories, white cottages and tiny wharves. Grey boulders rose out of the grain lands. The bay seemed to be an ancient valley drowned by the sea. At the south-eastern end were heavy dunes that might have smothered an old river channel. Gigantic sinking's and upheavals must have occurred, He knew there was a phosphate deposit on the hill, hundreds of feet above sea level; guano preserved for thousands of years by the dry climate so that the hill must have been a bird island ages ago. Oysters once flourished in the lagoon; now there were only the fossilised shells. Bones of long-dead whales had been found far below the surface on farms inland. The bay was a mystery, he thought, and he was content to leave the theories to the geologists.

All to the south lay the lagoon, the warm lagoon. He saw it as a living thing, quivering and golden under the sun, shimmering with silver under the moon, the great hush guarding its waters like a benediction. A fisherman had charged him three pounds for towing him into the lagoon; and as the bay closed round the yacht he knew that he had found the fabulous safe harbour of seafaring legend. Three pounds for the secret of life, three pounds for peace and contemplation, three pounds for this sanctuary.

Southwards for eight miles ran the lagoon, from the two islands at the entrance to a gabled homestead at the far end. Deep water sailing ships once followed the channels between the banks that dry out at low tide. Round the lagoon are farms and hills, vleis and springs with names inspired by

wild beasts; the places where elephant and buffalo and eland once drank. Some of the old farms have white thick-walled homesteads under neat black thatch, with huge lofts for pumpkins and cellars for wine. Oaks are centuries old. Finches and turtledoves nest in the poplar groves. Then the wheat lands appear, covering the rolling country from the bay eastwards to the far mountain ranges.

Down the coast he could see another white island and the long ocean beaches where he walked to find contrast, the surf that was a tumult after the peace of the lagoon. There he found different wonders. Once it was a dead octopus with eight foot tentacles and a head the size of a flour sack; an evil thing, terrifying even in death, spread out on the beach like a malignant purple flower of the sea.

Strange flotsam reaches these untrodden beaches. Another day the bloom of red water stained the blue ocean, the red tide of death, and masses of fish were washed ashore to lie under the sun for the birds to feed upon. But of all the mysteries of this coastline the hermit encountered the most dramatic was the suicide of the false killer whales. It seemed like suicide but he never solved the riddle. They rushed inshore by the hundred, these miniature whales; creatures so rare that they were almost unknown to science until they were driven into the haunts of man by some mysterious impulse. Blowing spouts of water, torn by jagged reefs, they reached the rock pools gashed and dying. The hermit saw three hundred of them lying before him in their death agony. As they died the gulls floated down and

pecked at the gleaming black bodies in this weird graveyard of the sea. Had they been attacked by sharks? Did the leader lose its head and start a mad rush towards the beach? The hermit was defeated by a mystery that still puzzles the naturalists of the world.

So he was learning to live with himself. Often he recalled the day he discovered Kraal Bay and the solitude of the lagoon. He knew immediately that this was the anchorage he had sought ever since the idea of a hiding place had taken shape in his mind. The fishing skipper had cast off the tow-rope, raised his arm in farewell and swung his boat round with a noisy tok-tok-tok and a wave of exhaust gas. Soon the yacht was alone in Kraal Bay. The man stood in the cockpit, drenched in the aroma of spring flowers, listening to the ringing cries

of the seabirds. "May I live to be a hundred," he prayed. "May I always come back to this place." He went forward and dropped the heavy anchor. For a while the rattle of the chain disturbed the birds; then there was peace again. He looked round when the fishing boat had gone past the point and not a human being could he see. Ostriches were coming down to the beach from the veld, a mother and her chicks. Goats roamed among the bushes devouring the flowers. But there was no road through the dunes, there were no motor-cars and the nearest farm was miles away. "This is it," he said again and again. He had turned a corner, shaken off the crowd and found a true hiding-place at last.

This was a world of tides. He had the tide tables with him, on the shelf where he kept his charts and sailing

directions and nautical almanac. Now he recorded the wind against the date and noted the ebb and flow; he intended to use the tide tables as a calendar so that he could always be sure of the days. Twice a day the green water would cover the beaches and leave its flotsam. The tides would bring jelly fish and bottles, timber and dead seabirds; and the sandpipers and scavenging birds would range the beaches and make new discoveries with their beaks. Here the tyranny of time would be annihilated. The sweep of the tides would clean the beaches at the appointed hours but never would the sounds of the lagoon jar on him like a factory hooter. Here he could live by the values of remote ancestors. He would come very close to the life of the earth and tiny creatures nearer to the earth than any human. This was

the way of life to which he had always been destined and he had reached it after many years of groping.

He had been hurt often when he was young. It had taken him years to learn that hurt could not be given; it could only be taken with all that the taking implied. Now he knew that the secret of life was to be capable of living with oneself. He had shaken off the illusion of the "gap in the ranks". No one was keeping a place open for him in case he returned; that was an absurd thought. He was not indispensable; long ago he had gained the freedom that comes only to those who know they are unimportant in the scheme of things. He had left the streets and pavements spread by man over the breathing earth; he had put behind him the cities that knew neither darkness nor stillness. Cities where nature had

been driven out, where the people lived in murderous proximity, a jungle of eyes and malicious lips. Now he was alone but not lonely. He smiled, for there had been so many times in his life when loneliness would have driven him to misery and nervous breakdown if he had not known the remedy.

The master was in control. He could withdraw his attention from himself whenever he wished. No use fighting something stronger than yourself. The person who cracks is the one who thinks only of himself. Friends crowding round trying to help. Loneliness was not a mental failure; it was an emotional abandonment. He could vanquish anything unpleasant by turning away. Once he had looked round for a book to absorb his mind and had found only a railway

timetable; it had served the purpose. On another day he had studied the agony column in a newspaper and found a horde of strange characters rising before his eyes. He became a little drop of personality detached from his own problems. He was like a camera, a human consciousness recording life, eternally recording the scenes and characters of a rich globe. He knew the world and its peoples and he could not imagine a day that would be barren in company with his imperishable memories. If memory failed him then he would think of the great days to come. But it would not fail; he knew that he possessed almost total recall of every episode in his life, the colours and aromas, faces and voices. On the stage of his mind the footlights glowed again, the players came and went, the echoes died away

with the full beauty of a great orchestra. He smiled at the threat of loneliness.

On that first day he had studied this golden harbour so that he could find the way out and back under sail without the aid of a pilot. As he stared round the bay the hill had beckoned to him and he knew that from the hilltop the lagoon channels would stand out like dark arteries in the sand. With a bottle of water in his pocket and a biscuit he rowed for the first time to the beach where his dinghy or his canoe would rest year after year after year. As he hauled the dinghy to high water mark the fragrance of the spring wonderland struck deep into his mind. The dunes were aflame with colour almost to the edge of the lagoon. The hill, rising to six hundred feet above the bay, was emerald green. He

climbed swiftly through the white and orange flowers, over the moss and ferns, and came to the stone-crowned summit. His yacht looked tiny on the sweep of green water, like a sea beetle. The vast panorama held him until the evening. The waters became dark green and opalescent as a trout's back. A huge flight of little waders drilled over the yacht, every throat sounding a strange call like the clashing of glass beads. They tumbled with ecstasy into projectile flight, always in faultless order. To a faint murmur of distant surf from the ocean a hundred rocketing little bodies touched the air with the fierce whisper of their speed. They dipped towards the water like flying arrowheads, arched upwards to that call of an unseen leader, then turned over in one mass, their silver bellies like flung jewels on the sky.

The setting sun dipped beneath a canopy of cloud and made a saffron shield on the horizon so that all the colour values altered. The lagoon seemed holy. At that moment the hermit realised that he had seen but one of the thousand faces of the lagoon. Deep in his mind he took an oath of allegiance and declared for the life he had chosen.

When he launched the dinghy it was dark, so dark that he seemed to be suspended in space beneath a canopy of stars. This was a new enchantment. Where the oars dipped there was a trail of phosphorous, as though a crocodile was following the dinghy but never overtaking it. As he coasted a sandbank there arose startled fluttering's of birds and those ringing cries he came to know so well. He rowed until the hill was a pyramid of

blackness where no stars shone. Then he shipped his oars and stood up. She must be here somewhere? For a long minute he stood in a silence unknown in the cities, peering into the blackness. It was windless that night and every star rode above its image in the water. Suddenly he saw his yacht not thirty yards off. She seemed immense, masts raking the stars. He scrambled on board. Soon the cabin was aglow, pressure stove roaring, teapot ready. Always he remembered the stillness of that first night, the peace that endured through the dark hours. "I love this life," he said to himself that night. "I shall always love it. One day I shall sail out of here and take my boat across the oceans. But I shall return."

Saldanha Bay lies sixty-five miles north of Table Bay on the South

African west coast. The year of the hermit's arrival was 1940. The hermit was Frank Armstrong Wightman, aged forty-four. A man of brilliant intellect. A giant in hiding. Height, five feet two inches.

CHAPTER 2

THE CAT THAT WALKED ALONE

“It is customary to point to hermits and solitaires as if they were savages and man-haters. But it is not true.”

G. K. CHESTERTON.

FIVE FEET two inches. James Wightman, his father, was of middle height, but his mother Caroline was short and all the children were small. James Wightman, a Scot of gentle birth and sound education, emigrated from Dumfriesshire to the Cape Colony in the late eighties of last century. He first worked in Kimberley during the great days of Rhodes and Barnato and moved on to the Transvaal by stage-coach before the railway was built. Then he returned to Scotland and married. The first child was on the way when James

Wightman set out for South Africa again, so he engaged a Highland nursemaid, a seventeen-year-old Celt named Isobel who spoke only Gaelic at that time.

James Wightman was not only a capable accountant but a charming personality. He settled in Johannesburg at a period when an honest and hard-working Scot with those qualities could hardly fail to prosper; and when he joined one of the great mining firms Wightman made a small fortune. Of course the South African War came as a blow but he did not lose his capital. James Wightman sent his family down to the Cape at the turn of the century; his wife, the elder son Douglas aged nine, Frank aged four¹, and of course the nursemaid Isobel. The children

¹ See appendix: Wightman, Frank Armstrong.

called her Aboo; Frank remembered something of the railway journey; he said the passenger train was escorted by an armoured train in case of attack by a Boer commando.

They lived at Muizenberg² in a house on the beach. One day Douglas rushed over the dangerous railway crossing to buy some caps for his toy pistol. There were two trains in the station, one obscuring the other. One train pulled out. Douglas was pinned down by the engine and he died the same day. Frank said he was taken into a neighbour's house and left to play with a toy boat on a smooth, polished floor. He was fascinated by the undulating motion of the toy, caused by a wheel in the bows. Such were his early memories; Muizenberg and the

flowers on his brother's grave. But he had one earlier memory. His mother could hardly believe it when he told her many years afterwards; but he proved it. He remembered his eyes being gummed up, picking skin off his eyelids. There was a blanket on a frame all round his bed and a large kettle gave out steam. That was the treatment for measles in those days. Frank recalled the details. He was three years of age.

After the accident James Wightman took the family back to Scotland for a change. The tragedy must have influenced Frank's life for he now received more attention from his ambitious father. James Wightman bought an estate in the wild Perthshire countryside and Frank could recall vividly an episode there. Isobel the nursemaid used to take him into a

² See appendix: Muizenberg.

wood where he lay on a bed of oak-leaves and drew fronds of bracken over his head. Then he stared up at the sky, the fronds breaking the blue expanse into promontories and coastlines; and this imaginative child of nature sailed his pirate ships into bays and channels and estuaries. One day there was a crackling of leaves and Frank turned to see an immense pair of boots at the end of leather leggings. He lay still, frightened. The man was carrying a gun and he wore tight moleskin trousers revealing his muscles when he moved. To Frank the man seemed half animal. Presently the boots came nearer and one of them prodded Frank gently. A deep, gruff voice said: "Whatterr yew doing' heerrr?" Frank lay still, petrified, hoping the man would think he was dead; but the boot touched his hip and

the gruff voice threatened: "Cummalong now. Whatterr y'doing' heerrr?" Frank sat up through the fronds, his head turned away. "Aboo brought me", he whispered. "An' who's Aboo?" Frank babbled in fear: "Aboo's my nurse." Then he bolted into the wood and found the nurse. "There's a man", he blubbered. Isobel greeted the man serenely in Gaelic and Frank heard him reply in a softer tone. For a while they talked but Frank could not take his eyes off the furred legs. On the way home he tugged Isobel's sleeve. "Why was he angry?" he asked. "He wurr not angry chile." Frank went on: "His legs were hairy, like a horse." Isobel's hand came down on Frank's head as she laughed softly. "And he had a gun!" said Frank. "He wurr a gehm-keeper, little wohn", explained Isobel. Her hand

stirred Frank's hair. "He wurr in liquor."

Frank knew nothing of the term "in liquor". He thought the man's name was Inlikka. When he lay awake in the nursery he used to hear Inlikka moving on the stairs. Inlikka became his secret boggy man. Years later Frank was standing at the foot of his mother's bed listening to something she was saying about a woman they had met that day. The recital ended with the words: "Of course she was in liquor." Frank stood there and watched, almost reluctantly, the fading of the boggy man Inlikka who had reigned over his dark hours since he was five.

"In the long years that followed there were other fade-outs", Frank once told me. "Women one imagined one loved. But no one as potent as Inlikka. He

just thrust me with his boot. A woman seeks more than that. But unlike Inlikka, a woman does not fade out. She abides with man. He is a good investment."

Frank always said that Isobel was psychic; she had the "second sight" of the Highlands. She could always tell when anyone was coming to the house. "Your Uncle Bill's on the way", she would announce, and Uncle Bill would arrive within the hour. Isobel told Frank he had the same gift. Isobel spoke of the evil eye, groaning bagpipes and ghostly warnings, mysterious lights and voices, phantom funerals, prophecies and poltergeists and all the Highland folklore. Isobel also used herbs as medicines and some of her beliefs Frank accepted willingly. Frank was nine when she left the Wightman family and two

sisters had been born in the meantime. Isobel married a Natal farmer and had a large family of her own. She was among those who influenced Frank's early life.

By the time he was eight Frank had voyaged three times between England and South Africa with his parents. He loved the sea even at that age and begged his father to take a small steamer. He liked watching the movements of small vessels in heavy weather. "I want to know I am afloat when the sea musters its forces", Frank declared. Once he travelled in the Aberdeen White Star liner *Marathon*, a lovely ship with clipper-bow, green hull, white upper works and a buff funnel. Captain Jock Allan, her master, had commanded the famous clipper *Thermopylae*, rival of *Cutty Sark* in the China Sea trade.

Frank Wightman listened and watched; and he knew, long before he entered his teens, that the sea would claim him. Among the steamers Frank had reason to remember was the ill-fated *Waratah*. He saw her in dock during her maiden voyage in 1908. She had an extra promenade deck such as few Australian liners of those days carried, but Frank did not form the impression that she was top-heavy.

The sea-hungry child remembered a spectacle that will never be seen again. It was the period when sailing ships were still common. Frank was on board the single-screw mail steamer *Carisbrooke Castle*, a flyer in her day with a reputation for rolling. She was tearing up the coast of Spain at her top speed of fourteen knots when a four-masted barque came up astern. Frank ran aft to watch. Wind fresh from the

south-west, the Carisbrooke snarling along with her red and black funnel almost swinging into the sea. And the barque overhauled her, every stitch set, black and long, lean and swift. "What do you think of her, eh son?" inquired the deep voice of the chief officer at Frank's side. "That's what they call an old windbag - and she's licking a crack mail boat. Remember her name, son - she's the *Loch Torridon*."

Tiny flags burst at the spanker gaff as the *Loch Torridon* swept past easily. She was going two knots faster than the wheezing, rattling steamer. Frank said he could hear the deep organ-note of the wind in her sails. The grace and power of her claimed Frank for ever. Great arched caverns of canvas booming in the wind. As the rising swells took her on the port quarter all

Frank could see were her lower top-sails. Then her lovely counter rose from the sea like a dark, gigantic bird. Away she went in a burst of white speed, course true as an arrow. One man at the wheel. Frank declared that she must have steered like a yacht. He raced up to the bows and stood on his toes to see over the rail. There he said good-bye to the *Loch Torridon*.

James Wightman was a landsman, a country lover, fond of horses and riding. Frank's mother was a wonderful rider, too, but Frank never really liked it. He was forced to learn riding, on the beach at Montrose in Scotland. "I was happy enough as long as the horse was enjoying it, stretching out like a dog gone crazy and sweeping across the sands", he recalled. "But you can feel it when the horse goes on just because he's afraid

to stop. You pick it up through your body, with his great sides between your legs, his great heart working. A trained horse will go on a long way after he wants to stop. I always drew my reins in and he would drop to a canter. 'You'll never make a horseman - you're not adventurous', my father told me. My father liked whisky and cigars and the riding worked the effects out of him; but the horse had to pay for it. Yes, I was a great disappointment to my father. Horses were fine and noble and I was supposed to like that sort of thing. My father wanted me to be what he called a sportsman. He tried to teach me golf and the day came when I could out-drive him. But the game never aroused a scrap of interest in me. Tennis was different, and fives. I grew very fond of those games."

At eleven Frank Wightman travelled to England again to become a boarder at Berkhamsted, the old grammar school thirty miles from London. The Very Reverend Thomas Charles Fry was the headmaster. Frank described him as "a Biblical character with a square white beard who sat on high". He reminded Frank of the martinet Arnold in "Tom Browne's Schooldays". One day Frank was sent to Dean Fry with a note stating that he had not learnt his Latin declensions properly. Cold blue eyes turned on the very small boy as Fry warned: "I'll beat you if you don't learn those declensions." Three years later Fry decided that Frank had not come high enough in the class. Frank had come second one term, eleventh the next. "You have demonstrated what you are

able to do and there is no excuse for you - bend down," Fry ordered. He delivered four cuts with the cane.

"I knew that I was going to be seared with fire," Frank said. "He knew that he was going to hurt me. Each in his measure? I to my humiliation. He to his triumph. It was like being punished by one of the Apostles. It was not the pain so much - it was the fact that I had to bend down and stick my bottom in his face. I was like a slave humbled before a tyrant. I can expose that now, in my maturity. Make no mistake though - in my heart was the instinct that enabled me to sense the cruel human jungle I had entered."

Frank Wightman hated almost every aspect of life at Berkhamsted. He was always hungry. Prefects were allowed beer. He tasted it once and carried through life an impression of an inky

flavour. Very soon he realised that he had a choice between drowning himself in the river or passing out as soon as possible; so he worked hard as a means of escape. He was a prisoner and freedom seemed a long way off but he was determined to pass out. Frank was regarded as a colonial, something barbaric in that circle. The atmosphere was Kipling's era; boys were drilled into becoming rulers but they were not educated. The whole system was drenched in aristocracy.

"I realise now, but I did not know it then, that the time for rulers had already passed," Frank told me. "The Empire was on the point of collapse. The gutter was rushing up to claim its own. They gave me English literature and I have loathed Dickens ever since. English and the classics. Trollope, Thackeray, Ruskin. Oh lord, Ruskin -

he wrote just like a painter, imagery so adorned with language that it was over-embroidered, almost scented. Dickens was not regarded as a classic but a good low-grade writer. In those days they admitted a few of the Americans like Walt Whitman - such a self-conscious exhibitionist that his wretched character kept coming through. It was rococo stuff and even now I can't read him without feeling sick. We got plenty of Shakespeare, of course - Shakespeare, when I was in love with Stevenson's 'Treasure Island'. They did not know how to treat us."

Frank never missed a day of the ordeal through illness. He tried malingering once but Mrs McBride the matron had the skill and outlook of an army doctor in this respect and Frank was sent back to his classroom. Never a day's

escape! He longed for the sun and the open spaces and then came a miracle. He was supposed to be delicate, probably on account of his size. (In fact he was physically superb.) His parents decided that he ought to spend a year in Cape Town and so he returned. He attended a private school in Sea Point known as Birch's and was duly thankful. I met someone who was there at that time and asked him what he thought of Frank Wightman. "A very sardonic little boy," was the reply.

The sardonic little boy went back to Berkhamsted when he was fourteen. During his last years there Frank became aware of a much younger boy named Graham Greene. Dean Fry had departed and Mr. Charles Henry Greene had taken his place. Frank declared that the new head was a

humanitarian who seldom caned anyone; he was a family man who could deal with boys without cruelty. Graham Greene evidently held other views, for he ran away from Berkhamsted. "I can remember Graham Greene, but only as a little boy in knickerbockers - a boy with a vivid face," said Frank. "You could sense the pain behind the too-bright smile." Frank would have liked to have seen more of the headmaster but there were five hundred boys in the school and Charles Greene was remote. Greene took Frank's class in Greek, however, and his pleasant voice impressed them all. Other teachers lacked inspiration. Frank said he could learn anything from a book but only the occasional teacher knew how to elucidate. The fool who taught algebra at Berkhamsted knew all the

technical jargon but he did not know what algebra meant. "A bad teacher can be an awful handicap to a boy," said Frank. Greek and Latin were compulsory. The snob cult of the period was German. Frank chose French. He took piano lessons, not because of what he called the "tinkle tinkle twang twang" but on account of his interest in harmony, the structure of music. Then he heard Paderewski and never touched a keyboard again. Even then Frank had something of the perfectionist in him but he went on studying music for years.

Religion bothered him for a time. He escaped the choir because he had no voice; but confirmation classes had to be attended and Frank was determined not to make the final surrender by kneeling before the archbishop. He used his wits and appealed to his

staunch Presbyterian mother. He was never confirmed. "I liked the incense," Frank said. "It killed the smell of humanity. I enjoyed the ritual and pageantry. Years afterwards I went to midnight mass in Buenos Aires at Christmas and I was deeply impressed. The theatricality was perfect. If you must have organised religion that is the way it should be. But the early morning chapel at Berkhamsted was another matter. I wanted to be out in the fresh air."

Like many other writers, Frank Wightman first wrote for the school magazine. It was a character sketch, heavily disguised, of a master he loathed. The master taught mathematics, chalk in one hand, cane in the other, dandruff on the collar of his gown. He would turn to the class, his mouth all sticky with excitement, a

computer rather than a teacher. Frank put his character into a different school and the piece got into print. Probably the English master recognised his victim but no one else seemed to see the resemblance. After that effort the English master showed an interest in Frank and encouraged him to write. Frank was fifteen at the time.

"Berkhamsted taught me to be highly suspicious of the human race," Frank summed up. "At the age of eleven I was stripped naked with other new boys and hunted down the long dormitory with a chamber on my head. The older boys drove the chamber down over my ears with their pillows while others lashed out at me with wet towels. I was caned by prefects when I walked on the common instead of playing cricket. Rugby revolted me

because every boy seemed to have a personal odour and I found myself in murderous proximity to some dirty fellows in a scrum. I liked gymnastics and took part in displays. Swimming appealed to me enormously but there was not much swimming in the English climate. I disliked the prickly cadet uniform, the blank cartridges and the drilling. My nickname at school was 'the cat that walks alone'. It was true. I did not want to be popular, only obscure. And all the time I realised that I was alone and that the only way to get out was to work."

Frank travelled widely in Europe during the school holidays. He visited places as far apart as Tresco in the Scilly Isles (admiring the figureheads) and Madrid, where he was entranced

by the Velasquez portraits in the Prado. He was repelled by "religious art", cherubim's blowing trumpets, but captivated by "Las Meninas". Frank saw Le Toquet and Cannes and other French resorts in the days when bathing was the pastime of the few and sun-bathing unknown. People lived indoors. A fashion parade started on the boulevards at five in the afternoon. Only foreigners walked. "It was a world of overdressed, overfed, under washed people," Frank said. "My childish interests were mainly historical. Even then I wanted to get at the archives in ancient cities. I wanted to see whether the vainglorious accounts of Drake's raid on Cadiz were confirmed by the old Spanish reports. But schoolboys were not admitted to archives."

James Wightman wanted Frank to take a university course after leaving Berkhamsted. Frank wanted to go to sea. Both father and son appear to have been frustrated at this period. Frank drifted about London for some months attending lectures that interested him but failing to start a career. He loved London because it was so rich in everything that gripped him. The poor souls curled up under newspapers on the Embankment made him unhappy; he often walked there at midnight to watch the lights on the water and he gave what he could spare to the ragged children. But he thought the people of England and Scotland of his own circle were the fortunate ones of the earth. "Nature is gentle on those islands," Frank once said to me. "In the warm countries nature can be an awful old bitch; you're just flesh,

something to be eaten, and to hell with how you feel. All those stinking insects. You walk on a beautiful tropical reef and next day you've got a swollen foot. But in England and Scotland there are little, quiet, empty places, not threatened or spoilt. It may not be stimulating but if you want peace and tranquillity and freedom from the savagery of Nature you find it there."

One of Frank's hobbies during his London period and for years afterwards was photography. He combined it with his love of ships and took his plate camera to Poplar and Wapping and his favourite St. Katharine Dock. "There were many sailing ships then," Frank recalled. "In pimples and a bowler hat I wandered there dreaming of marvellous, heeling ships and far countries." Frank entered

photographic competitions, won prizes and saw his pictures in the *Amateur Photographer*; he never held a high opinion of his achievements. "My pictures were not creative or well-composed - only imitative," he declared. "However, I liked taking the Thames barges under sail - and those wonderful luggers coming into Polperro, fleets of them, narrow craft with balanced lugs."

He lived in a boarding-house at Blackheath. Nearly half a century later he described the people there in a way that brought home to me the fine points of his photographic memory. The place was called St. Wolfram's, a venerable house with one bathroom for four floors. It was owned by a bishop's daughter. Frank rented a little attic room. The owner had a method. She always arrived discreetly late for

dinner. When she came in, wearing a lacy and voluminous gown, all the lodgers rose - even the women. If the talk at the table became "risky" she drew herself up and announced: "This conversation is not elevating." The owner was greatly assisted by a guest who was a teacher in an infant school, but who tried to convey that she taught English literature to older children. She illustrated her stories about "my students" with roguish eyebrows, arch smiles and gestures rehearsed before a mirror. In her stories there were no people; everyone was an individual. A nose was always a proboscis or olfactory organ.

War came. Frank went outside one night to find the searchlights playing on an enormous silver target, a Zeppelin over Woolwich Arsenal. It hung stationary like a sausage in the

night sky, not very high. Two little gondolas could be seen beneath the huge and vulnerable envelope. Anti-aircraft batteries opened fire and hit the great unwieldy thing. It dipped rather like a horse giving way on its hind-legs and seemed to be coming down in the Thames. Then the propellers broke fiercely into spinning circles of light and the airship teetered away into the darkness, stern hanging low. It was wrecked somewhere in Kent.

Earnest little brochures were issued after that visit: "In Case of Air Raids". At St. Wolfram's everyone was supposed to scuttle down into the cellar. There came a night when a Zeppelin dropped a bomb in Greenwich Park and the explosion brought all the boarders out of their beds. Frank lit his fish-tail gas jet, hurried

out on to the landing and found the owner. She was very different from the bishop's daughter he had known. No teeth, less hair and a flannel night-gown. Frank and the owner hurried down four flights of stairs, averting their eyes. Frank could not bear the sight of a formidable and familiar presence looking so human. As they stumped down the last flight of stairs they saw twenty upturned faces beneath the hall chandelier of three gas-mantles. All the faces were waiting in this crisis for the presence which ruled their behaviour. At first they failed to identify the owner; but when they did, each face became ceremoniously attentive; each pair of eyes tried to proclaim that they were seeing nothing unusual. A retired colonel in bed-socks, dressing-gown and monocle, stepped forward and

offered the owner his arm. Then, in a long two-by-two crocodile, and in a murmur of polite conversation, they all snaked down the cellar stairs. “To this day I don’t know whether she was unaware of how she looked, or whether she was a consummate actress,” Frank wound up. “Her composure was complete.”

Frank Wightman offered his services to the navy and the army. There were no “bantams” in uniform in those early days of World War I. The men in the recruiting offices turned him down and sniggered before he was out of the door. Someone suggested to Frank that he might do useful work as a cable operator. Even that was not easy but James Wightman had influence with relatives in the Western Telegraph Company. Frank was accepted as a pupil at the company’s London school.

For more than a year he hammered the Morse instruments, studied electrical circuits and then passed out with ease.

CHAPTER 3

THE CABLE ISLES

*"If a man does not keep pace with his
companions
perhaps it is because he hears a
different drummer.
Let him step to the music which he
hears."*

THOREAU.

STRUNG out roughly midway between Africa and South America are the isles of the cable exiles. The two continents obviously once belonged to one another. They are almost a jigsaw fit and when they drifted apart they left a submarine ridge seven thousand miles long. From this mid-Atlantic rise, high islands break the surface. Other lone giants lie off the chain, precarious volcanic islands where no one worries until the lava flows again. Men of the cable services have known some of

these islands for the whole of this century. The long submarine wire stretched out to the Azores and Madeira towards the end of last century and finished at St. Vincent in the Cape Verdes. Frank Wightman came to know these old mid-ocean outposts where the flags of Portugal and Britain fly over strange and historic harbours.

"Cable men were pampered in some places," Frank declared. "Of course there were stations where they drank too much, where the malaria and the quinine played havoc and where for some the loneliness was an even more serious menace. They sent us out to the tropics with ridiculous outfits: sun helmets with flaps at the back, spine pads, cholera belts and flannel garments to wear next to the skin. Flannel on the equator! I had a fine medical

record because I disobeyed the rules and drank less than some of the others. There was a lot of heavy drinking. You could do what you liked - but heaven help any man who failed to go on duty. I did many a duty for men supposed to have fever. Whisky was four shillings and sixpence a bottle. In some places all our drinks were duty free. I stuck to gin and tonic; the tang of the tonic appealed to me. We signed chits for everything. When a man was promoted or left the station or got married there was a party. We always had loads of servants. It was a fantastic life, really. The bachelors' quarters looked like a monastery but they were not. We lived well in our messes and it was worth putting on a white duck dinner jacket for the meals they served there. I enjoyed the olive oil and garlic of the Portuguese. When

we entertained the navy there was roast beef. At other times we had tropical fish and wonderful omelettes, curries with all sorts of spices, the food of the country and delicious coffee and bread."

I asked him about the work. "You just had to be a Morse code expert," Frank replied. "Before leaving the training-school in London you were required to send and receive a flawless twenty-five words a minute. Later I could read forty and I could do it for hours at a time. Transmitting meant punching holes in paper tape which is perforated according to the dots and dashes of the Morse code. You're nervous at first but then it becomes completely mechanical. You wrists feed the remorseless, greedy instruments. Key perforators are almost museum pieces nowadays - they only keep them in

case of a breakdown. But in my day everything was hand-operated. You dipped your first and second fingers into the hollows of the ivory keys and kept your mind still and let go. The perforator hummed busily, whirring smoothly, clicking softly. Expert operators allowed their brains to go to sleep while they were doing it. When a man worked at that speed you could not see his hands. You simply passed into a sort of coma while your hands went flying on. Receiving was different because you had to watch a moving strip of paper with zigzag dots and dashes and write fast and clearly. Then they brought in typewriters with covered keyboards and I got an increase in pay when I mastered the new method. I also passed out in advanced electricity and ‘distortions’ - I could read mutilated signals. They

transferred me often owing to pressure of work and I made a lot of money in overtime. Between the wars, of course, the high-speed automatic system came in and skills the old cable hands had acquired were wasted. Large staffs were paid off or retired on pension. A way of life had changed out of recognition. The cable stations are still there, manned by a few supervisors. The quarters are almost empty, full of ghosts, with mine among them.”

The islands are still there, too, the cable islands, the islands of exiles, the islands of ghosts. Frank Wightman’s first station was Fontal in Madeira. He went up the steep Calgada de Santa Clara to the old convent and the cable station. Frank said it was good to be warm again in Funchal after London; good to follow the terrifying *levada* walks on the heights of the island;

good to climb the Pico de Arieiro, six thousand feet high, where they stored the caked ice of winter in the days before refrigerators. He liked the aromas of crushed sugar-cane, the rich wine and the strong perfume of frangipane. Up in the mountains where he wandered alone among the clouds there was a resinous pine smell over the rocks and the cold streams. He listened to the black birds singing and the songs of the *borracheiros* going downhill cheerfully with their skins of new wine; he heard the morning, noon and evening angelus. Life was good on Madeira for a young cable operator; but the poor hard-working peasants sometimes became hopeless and jumped over the cliff at Suicide's Corner, where they fell straight into deep water. They had stones round their necks.

Frank liked the Portuguese. They were his favourite Latin race, warm and hearty, close to life and not so formal as the Spanish. Funchal had a circle of exiled Portuguese royalists in those days and there were a number of political prisoners. The cable station was in the grounds of the Santa Glara convent and the mother superior had been lady-in-waiting to Queen Amelia. This upright little patrician spoke English well. She arranged for the cable men's laundry to be done by the nuns. Before Frank left Funchal the mother superior gave him some advice. "I know the life you cable operators lead - but don't overdo it," she advised. "You're going to spend a lot of time at sea so I am giving you this charm, the patron saint of seafaring men." Frank thought she had second sight. He had a peculiar gift

himself which he discovered when he sat down at the roulette table in the Funchal casino. Many of the operators went there on pay day and lost their money; but Frank told me that when he was in the mood he could see the colours before the wheel stopped spinning. The croupiers did not like it, for others watched him and won. According to the croupiers that was not proper gambling.

First contract operators at the Funchal cable station were still classed as trainees. Old hands devised an initiation ceremony; they went up to the houses behind the Bazaar do Povo, the Casa Veranda and the Casa Vermelha, and drank large tumblers of Madeira wine with the girls there. Frank remembered an Italian woman called Rosie and Manchester Meg and a girl from Johannesburg. The girls

told Frank it was a poor sort of living except at carnival time, when they were kept very busy.

Funchal was bombarded one Sunday morning in December 1916, when a U-boat appeared suddenly. First she torpedoed the French men-o'-war *Surprise* and *Kangaroo*; then there was a black cloud of coal dust as the British cable steamer *Dacia* was hit in the bunkers. The submarine surfaced and aimed her gun at the cable station. Operators were on the balcony watching the attack when Frank went with the superintendent to bury a spare set of instruments in the garden. Many people rushed into the cathedral to pray but they were no sooner inside than shrapnel from the submarine was rattling on the roof and bringing down the tiles. The cable men could see the German ratings on the deck of the

submarine; a man with a rifle on the jetty could have picked them off easily. Shore batteries opened up at last and the submarine departed. Among the doctors who attended to the casualties was a famous British resident, Dr. Michael Grabham, who lived to ninety-five. He collected clocks, hundreds of clocks of every type. Frank used to visit his villa and listen to the chimes. Grabham was the doctor who attended them and the cable station also had an elderly nursing sister who wore a huge and unreal yellow wig.

Now and again the operators would visit the small neighbouring island of Porto Santo, a volcanic remnant with a sandy plain. Devastated by rabbits and raided by corsairs and pirates long ago, Porto Santo has also survived the hot siroccos of the centuries and many

crop failures. It is a natural sanatorium with a local alkaline mineral water which the cable men regarded as the right treatment for celebrations in Funchal. Some of the operators looked upon the six to eight hours voyage in small, lime-carrying sailing craft as an adventure. Frank revelled in it.

After a spell in Funchal twenty operators including Frank Wightman left Madeira for St. Vincent in the Cape Verde group. They were bound for South America; but owing to the war they had to go to St. Vincent first, in April, 1917, in an incredible old Portuguese rattletrap of a steamer called *Loanda* of two thousand tons. Her smokestack had an old-fashioned flange; it was nearly as high as the masts and became red-hot when the furnaces were stoked up to give the full speed of eleven knots.

Frank remembered the cockroaches in the dining-saloon, where the cable men slept on the long leather settees; the stewards who tried to augment their incomes by selling filthy postcards; and above all he never forgot the heavy rolling. She was lean as a fish and she rolled so deeply that each great swing seemed as though it must end in disaster. But at last the circular bay of Porto Grande appeared with the white houses of Mindello against the black, soaring volcanic heights of St. Vincent.

There have been links between the Cape Verde islands and the Cape of Good Hope ever since the Dutch East India Company's days. Those old sailors called them the Salt Islands; and indeed it is on the Ilha do Sal that South African Airways aircraft touch down nowadays before flying to

Johannesburg in one hop. Petrol has become the modern need rather than fresh water and vegetables for scurvy-stricken crews. When the dirty *Loanda* dropped anchor there in 1917 the island of St. Vincent was the most important cable station in the world. Western Telegraph kept one hundred men there. Northwards ran the cables to Madeira and the Azores; southwards through Ascension to St. Helena and Cape Town, and also to the River Plate; eastwards to West Africa only two hundred and fifty miles away.

All the islands of the group were uninhabited when the Portuguese explorers arrived five centuries ago. Some archaeologists claim to have found ancient rock inscriptions and the prehistoric structures called dolmens, but Frank studied them and said they

were controversial. Most of the islanders are mulattoes; pure whites are known as *brancos*. A Jewish strain has been observed in the islands but the origin is a mystery. Cape Verde islanders form a definite type, taller than the Portuguese and speaking their own dialect called Creole. Many thousands emigrated to the United States and Brazil last century, for the islands have never been prosperous and even in fairly recent years there have been famines with many deaths.

St. Vincent lies astride the great trade routes and when coal ruled the ocean highways St. Vincent ranked after Port Said, Malta and Singapore as the fourth largest coaling station of the seven seas. Liners bound for Table Bay called there and during the South African War the harbour was crowded with transports. One army officer

summed up Mindello in these words: "Taken as a whole it is, perhaps, the most wretched and immoral town that I have ever seen; but what can be expected of a colony which is rated at such a low ebb that the salary of the governor is only four shillings and sixpence a day." Another visitor said that the town lived on coaling, smuggling, begging, ship chandlery and prostitution.

Mindello has a local can-can which Frank saw nowhere else in the world. The original can-can was an African dance named after a clap of thunder. In the Mindello version four naked girls take part, standing one in each corner of the room. Mulattoes in the audience whistle and clap, and when the rhythm becomes fierce and the excitement intense two girls from opposite corners rush forward as fast

as space allows and meet in the centre. As they collide with a loud smack they leap into the air, fall apart and return to their corners. Then the other pair repeat the rush and the can-can "thunder-clap". Such a dance may last until the girls are utterly exhausted. It is more a feat of endurance than a dance, this strange can-can of Mindello.

In the town of cobbled streets and low, tiled houses there stands the huge cable station surrounded by high white walls. The newcomers stared in wonder at the gardens, for soil had been brought over from the neighbouring island of San Antonio and the flowers were a startling vision in this barren place. The cable station had electricity; people in the town used paraffin. There was tennis and a fives court. Beyond the town was a golf

course which might have been laid out in the Sahara.

They played cricket on cement covered with matting on a field littered with boulders. In the enormous mess room there were high ceilings and long, polished tables with a huge fan over each table. The light came in through red jalousies and the atmosphere was always ruddy and subdued. In the sleeping quarters there was a central corridor as wide as a street with thick coir on the floor so that operators off duty would not be disturbed. One maid looked after three rooms. If she was elderly she farmed out each room to a younger girl, chosen by the occupant after a discreet interview with the procuress.

"St. Vincent in my day was the most drunken cable station I ever knew," said Frank Wightman. "Most of the

cable men hated it and drank instead of going out and taking exercise. Some found a queer fascination there and applied to go back. We drank grog cocktails, white rum matured in sherry casks with raisins and mixed with water, lime juice and bitters. Water for washing was distilled from sea water at the cable station; but fresh water with a much better flavour came every day from fertile San Antonio by a special 'water boat'."

Operators spent most of their waking hours in the instrument room. At the great St. Vincent cable junction it was a room as large as a small town square, a score of trestle tables holding the instruments. Machinery whirled and moaned and clicked under strong lights. Some instruments were placed under glass domes, soundless and delicate. Other unprotected instru-

ments dropped miles of punched cable "slip" on to the floor. Men bent over instruments with the tender concentration of lovers. Everyone on night duty wore rope-soled shoes, so there were no footfalls as operators moved about. The vast place was filled with the humming life of instruments; mindless, soulless, heartless, exacting. To the operators those instruments were the eternal challenge. For twelve hours a day, six hours at a time, they pitted human endurance, skill, accuracy and speed against the instruments. The lines were overloaded during the war and the operators had to work overtime. It was well-paid work, but the strain was felt even by the younger men.

Although he was a newly-fledged operator Frank soon found himself on the London circuit. It was a tribute to

his skill for this was the prime circuit. His task was to sit beside a senior whose key perforator screamed with speed. When the insatiable transmitter overtook the senior then the junior came to his aid and perforated tape at a lower speed. The situation became desperate when the “slip” was snatched from the operator by the transmitter. As a rule it dipped in an easy loop to the floor.

“What did you do when you were not at work?” I asked Frank.

“I found enough to do, learning Portuguese and climbing the Monte Verde,” he replied. “When you reach the clouds the weird volcanic rocks are below you, and there are aloes and crops, acacias and fresh grass. But the lava formations are so grotesque that they are memorable. Someone called it ‘a petrified thunderstorm of a land-

scape’. It was cool on the Monte, and the company owned houses up there to provide a change of air. Some men just lay on their beds under the fans when they were off duty, or got up and drank. Most of them read the London newspapers and the ‘Tatler’ and talked about what they would do when they got back to England. Lonely bachelors broke down now and again but they had to be pretty bad before they were sent back. I loved the island once I got away from Mindello. It was a great, clean, empty place. Hardly a soul anywhere outside the town.”

Boys dive for coins at St. Vincent as at Madeira but these waters are far more dangerous. Grim tales were told in cable quarters of white people and black being devoured by sharks. It is so hot that swimming is a necessity and there is the little place known as

Catfish Bay where a reef keeps the sharks out. Cable men bathed at Matiota beach near the station, keeping a sharp lookout. One day a ship came in with mules for France and a dead mule was thrown overboard. Sharks streaked towards it like torpedoes. They played water-polo with the carcass, hitting it so hard with their snouts that it was lifted above the surface. The lazy sharks had suddenly become active as dynamite. They tore the mule to pieces while those who watched made up their minds to avoid the jaws of man-eaters.

Every large cable station had its trained hospital sisters but at St. Vincent in wartime there was no British doctor. "Those two sisters from Edinburgh who were stationed at St. Vincent were the most remarkable medical women I have ever met,"

Frank recalled. "They had so much theatre experience that they could do surgery. I used to help them. Once I saw them operate for a bowel stoppage; and an appendix removal meant no more to them than scrubbing the floor. They never lost their heads. I watched them extracting a steel splinter from a man's eye. I had to hold the eyelid back while they used a magnet and then covered the eye with wax. My own eyes were streaming in sympathy with the patient. I had to turn away when they were doing a tracheotomy; the man was purple in the face and his eyes were bulging. One sister opened the larynx with a little silver lance and the wind whistled in like a vacuum cleaner. I was distressed, but the sisters smiled and told me I was hysterical. They were far better surgeons than the local

Portuguese doctor with his primitive methods. He inspected the girls in the brothels once a week and that was about the limit of his skill.”

Fresh lobster and other fish courses are the best items on the St. Vincent menu. Devilled chicken is passable. Goat is sold as mutton; beef is tough. Maize grows in the valleys after rain has fallen, and the maize dish called zaburro is the food of all poor islanders. Milk comes from tins or goats. Butter arrived from Madeira in tins. Melons grew in a little patch the size of a carpet outside the town. Fortunately some of the other Cape Verde islands are able to send oranges and bananas, grapes and sweet potatoes to waterless St. Vincent. There is an avenue of mango trees in Mindello, drawing enough moisture to bear fruit. Mindello smells of bacalhau, the dried

cod sold in every grocer's shop; of coal dust and the sand that blows over from Africa with the harmattan wind; of good island coffee and cheap aguardiente spirit.

The sound Frank never forgot was the spine-chilling death wail. It is a long scream of agony on a note that every islander recognises instantly and it is heard just after the moment of death. Then comes a different wailing as the relatives of the dead person gather at the house. All that night people passing look through the open windows and see the body laid out under a shrine and candles. Wailing is continuous until the coffin is carried out for the funeral. If there are no relatives women are hired to do the wailing. Frank was there when Ramon the guitarist cut his throat and he told me that the wailing was almost

unbearable. Ramon was in love and he was also a spiritualist. That indeed was a night to remember.

Women do a great deal of the heavy work of Mindello. They are *carga* women, the carriers who take incredible loads on their heads. Coal and wicker-covered *garafaos* of water, bags of flour, maize and rice are carried by these tireless women, not all of them young. Some people dream of gold, for gold was found in a cargo of clay sent from the islands to the United States long ago. But life is an ordeal and even the comfortable people of the cable station have felt it keenly during the years of exile. Only when they have departed and look back down the years do they remember fondly the rugged outline of St. Vincent in the moonlight; the gaiety of Mindello market; the small

black children clamouring for pennies; the women wearing mantillas answering the call of the church bell; the girls with pitchers at the well under the palm trees; the siesta hour and then the tinkle of a mandolin and the six o'clock cocktail parties at the cable station. *Partimos!* It is over.

CHAPTER 4

SOUTH AMERICA

*Fair maiden of the south, I love
to see thy domes and dainty spires
Caught in the warm embrace of
sunset's after-glow
When soft Atlantic breezes brush thy
cheek.*

FRANK WIGHTMAN.

MONTEVIDEO was Frank Wightman's next station. It was there that he wrote his first and last poem, published in the *Zodiac*, the magazine of the cable service. The verse ran on:

*But there are days when all our
world seems dead
With nature panting in the sun
and shadows sigh,
When the flat ocean spreads a
trembling breathless blue,
Reflecting painted ships and
cloudless sky.*

*Then surges the raging pampero
to shriek
Like wild unloosened spirits o'er
thy head.*

Cable operators of those days regarded Montevideo as the healthiest of their stations. Frank saw Uruguay as a flat little republic crouching warily between its two great neighbours, the Argentine and Brazil. The cable men called the town "M.V." They had a pleasant mess on the beach at Positas, three miles from the station. Pamperos brought the heat and there was frost in winter.

Frank continued to help the nursing sisters at the Montevideo cable quarters when he was off duty. He had given up his idea of studying medicine as a result of the sister's remark at St. Vincent; he did not think he could use the knife and he would not have been

satisfied with the life of a general practitioner. But he was interested in the body as a piece of mechanism and he read everything on the wide subject that came his way. Among the patients at Montevideo was an operator who had come down from the Amazon. He lay on a water-bed suffering from tropical boils and they thought he would never recover. The boils erupted and his body looked as though he had smallpox. The matron saved his life.

Montevideo was the only clean town Frank saw in South America but he found little inspiration in the countryside. He used to trudge into the district round Montevideo during his long week-ends. There was not much to see, though he did find an “obscure being” living in a hut with his swarming brood. He belonged to some

past age, yet he lived within fifteen miles of the capital. The family survived owing to the man’s skill as a trapper. Every so often the wife carried a tiny crop of pimentos to market, grown on the few square yards of parched earth they had cleared.

It was in Montevideo that Frank Wightman attended ballet classes, conducted by a Madame Ried de Bideleux. Someone told me long ago that Frank Wightman had followed a ballerina round the world and there was a grain of truth in the story. This romantic episode belongs to Frank’s years in South America. I am still a little mystified because Frank was always reticent about certain aspects of his links with the Diaghilev ballet.

His interest in ballet had started when he went to the Paris opera at the age of thirteen with his mother to see Serge

Diaghilev's Russian ballet. That was the period when the art of ballet was flowering again after it had been kept alive in the music-halls. Frank saw Pavlova quivering like a butterfly on the wonderful arches of her feet; he admired the brilliant choreography of Michel Fokine; and above all he watched breathlessly the greatest male dancer of all time, Vaslav Nijinsky. "As a result of that experience I wanted to become a Nijinsky myself," Frank informed me.

Students of ballet history will remember that Diaghilev found it difficult to secure contracts in Europe during World War I, so he arranged a South American tour. Diaghilev remained behind; a gypsy had warned him that he would die on the ocean and he was afraid of German submarines. Nijinsky went, of course,

with his wife Romola. Naturally the tour was a matter of intense fascination for Frank Wightman and he hated to miss a performance. At this time he was being sent round from station to station to demonstrate the new typing technique which he had mastered. For this reason Frank was able to attend ballet performances at San Paulo, Montevideo and especially at Buenos Aires during the three months' tour.

"I was interested not only in the show but in a Russian girl named Olga," Frank confessed. "The first time I saw her she was dancing a little pastoral by Greig - she had a small part. Olga was really too big for a ballerina yet she was quite a dancer. She was a whore - but a gorgeous whore. Most dancers do not take lovers; the strain of ballet does not leave much time for sexual

indulgences. It is a demanding, an exhausting occupation. Olga was insatiable. She was completely amoral. I meant nothing to her but I chased her up and down. One night I was on duty and I received a long cable addressed to her by a wealthy Argentinian. It was full of adoration. He thought she had pledged her heart to him. I remember typing it out and thinking: 'Poor devil, you don't know where you are.' Years afterwards I saw Olga in Pavlova's company - just as magnificent and probably just as passionate. I wonder what happened to her in the end? Ah, that's the trouble. Often you can't say what happened to someone."

Frank was present at the last performance Nijinsky ever gave. It was at the great Teatro Colon in Buenos Aires towards the end of the tour. Nijinsky had become silent and

irritable and the producer Grigoriev was finding difficulty in coping with him. On the stage, however, Nijinsky was still the incomparable dancer. He was losing his reason yet the audience seemed to restore him and he in turn almost stunned the audience with his incredible floating leaps. There was something almost sinister in the choice of Nijinsky's last two ballets. One was *Le Spectre de la Rose* in which he soared out through the window for the last time; the other was *Petrushka*, ending with the killing of the dancer.

I listened intently to Frank's description of *Le Spectre de la Rose* for he was in the narrative mood that night. When he spoke the footlights shone again, the enormous curtain swept aside, the strings brought a wave of pleasure over the theatre and the dancers entered their world to the huge

gasp of an audience already enthralled. Yes, the great names of the Diaghilev ballet rose from the past when Frank spoke, not as ghosts but as the reigning princes and princesses of their stage.

“Such decor had never been seen in South America before,” Frank began. “South America was in a way uncivilised. They understood the opera and arias were sung everywhere by peanut boys, but dancing was not part of their lives. Diaghilev turned ballet into an art like grand opera and brought it to them. When the curtain went up there was a blaze of colour and the audience burst into applause just because of the spectacle. Then came the kaleidoscope of living bodies, sixty people all dancing superbly. You ask what made *Le Spectre de la Rose* so memorable. You

should have seen it. This is the story of a girl who comes back from a ball, walks on to the stage and across to a chair. She sits down and picks up a rose, kisses it, then falls asleep. The lights are lowered as she drops her rose and sleeps in the chair. Nijinsky comes in, arriving suddenly out of the night with a prodigious jump. Another immense gasp from the audience. He lands on one side of the stage and does a beautiful arabesque, floating on his toes with expressive fingers moving gracefully. He circles back like a trapped moth. Then he sees the girl, regards her for a moment, picks her up and dances with her in ecstasy. At the end he leads her back to the chair, drops her into it and departs in the soaring leap that made him famous. After that leap the applause was so tremendous that the girl would have

difficulty in hearing her cue from the music. She had to wait, look down, see the rose, pick it up and hold it to her throat. Then the curtain falls and they take a curtain call together. Not one call. I remember a night when the fifth curtain aroused more sheer adoration than the first. It was a fabulous ballet. Those rich South American women used to throw their jewellery on to the stage from the boxes. They lost their heads. But then Nijinsky was a glittering dancer, the greatest of all time. Most dancers look as though they are spurning the stage when they are trying to achieve flight. Nijinsky gave the impression of having difficulty in coming down. His elevation was astounding. What gave him that power? Some said it was the low placing of his knees resulting in a strange and unique muscular brio.

Possibly that was correct. Pavlova had something in the arch of her feet, an inner strength that set her apart from all other women dancers. Nijinsky had a secret of that sort too. We all basked in the glory of it and knew that when Nijinsky went the world would never see his like again. And he went before my eyes ... for the last time."

I asked Frank why Nijinsky had become insane. Many people have said it was because of the ghastly quarrel with Diaghilev after he had married the little amateur dancer Romola de Palska. Grigoriev, who knew Nijinsky over a long period and watched to his consternation the first symptoms appearing, declared that Nijinsky had the seeds of madness in him and they were bound to grow. Frank said he knew the reason but it would not do to divulge it.

How did Frank Wightman come to know these legendary figures of the old Russian ballet so well? That is the mystery I mentioned at the opening of this interlude and I was never successful in finding an answer. I gathered that he saw these people not only from the auditorium but also as a watcher in the wings. Once he gave the merest hint that he wanted to appear with them as a coryphee, a male member of the *corps de ballet*. Is it possible that Grigoriev allowed the little pupil of Madame Ried de Bideleux to take some part somewhere in South America? I doubt whether such perfectionists as the Russians would have tolerated an amateur in their midst. Yet it is just possible that Frank demonstrated his skill and persuaded them and achieved one of his ambitions.

It was a hard life for everyone according to Frank and only their devotion to dancing kept them together. That, and the fact that they could not do anything else. During a tour organised by Diaghilev the hotel bills were paid on the nail but many of the dancers had known difficult periods when they were never sure about the next meal. No wonder men and girls succumbed to offers. Frank remembered a fine youth of nineteen, a born dancer, who was “bought out” by a wealthy woman who owned an *estancia*. She fell in love with him and the company never saw him again.

“They’re physically beautiful, like racehorses, those ballet dancers,” Frank went on. “Three hours of exercises every morning. Even Tamara Karsavina had to take part and she was a star. Then rehearsals all the

afternoon; and then the evening performance. No wonder they don't last. They say a male dancer is burnt out at thirty-three but a ballerina may go on after forty. It's just toe work for the women, you see, whereas the men have to do those enormous leaps."

Frank Wightman certainly lifted the curtain on ballet for me. He traced it from the camp fires of primitive man to the courts of the French kings and on to the Russia of the Tsars. He saw ballet as a universal need, the sense of release given to mankind while watching the dancers floating in mid-air for long moments before the graceful descent. "Diaghilev was the soul of the ballet," Frank vowed. "He was like a wild beast when he heard that Nijinsky had married, a maniac eaten up with jealousy. Yet he was the last of the great ballet producers.

When he died in Venice the whole thing broke up. I saw the best of it and the end of it, when Nijinsky rocketed out of the window for the last time."

Frank Wightman was transferred to Buenos Aires from Montevideo. He hated it because it was "so consciously international". After the neatness of Montevideo the city was gaudy and sprawling. But the pampas made "BA" look like a juke-box. The pampas started twelve miles out of town and Frank visited the fringe whenever he was given a long week-end off duty. He loved the magnificent grazing country stretching right across the continent to where the Andes rose to the skies. The vaqueros were like centaurs though Frank turned his eyes away from their cruel, long-spiked spurs.

Frank rode over the Andes by mule-train during his Buenos Aires service. The track was precipitous and one man felt so dizzy that he walked along the path with his face pressed to the cliff. Frank was able to stand any height and look down without fear. It was cold in the hut where they slept in hammocks; the peasants wore llama-skin garments with the fur turned inwards. "I loved the west coast, the stripped hounds-tooth cleanliness, the windswept emptiness, those towering peaks of the Andes," said Frank. "It was all so different from the lush beauty of Brazil. Lima was a lovely city to live in, right in the Inca country with all those wonderful ruins only twenty minutes away." Yet he also loved Rio. He spent a full year in Rio, and there he owned a little sailing boat for the first time in his life, the

Senorita. (He had taught himself to sail at Funchal, hiring boats from fishermen who were angry when he made mistakes due to inexperience.) Frank remembered a Rio carnival with a special float for prostitutes. Cable quarters were at Nictheroy on the far side of the bay. The jungle began outside Frank's window. One day a marmoset, chased by dogs, jumped through the window and landed on Frank's mosquito net. He fed the little creature and she returned next day with a baby the size of a matchbox. Frank got away into the green forests as often as he could, the jungle where the immense blue butterflies called Imperiales hovered.

So many British doctors were serving in the army that the cable men in Rio had to rely on Brazilians or their own nursing sisters. Frank said the

Brazilians were just “pox doctors” but the matrons were splendid as ever. His respect for these women was not extended to the wives of cable superintendents. They were “dragons”. One such wife was raising funds for the Red Cross when she heard that the operators had received a bonus. She got the bonus from many of the younger men and they were afraid to say anything. “They were a curse, those wives - women of no importance fortuitously exalted to the position of ‘first lady’ in a world of men,” Frank declared. “When you danced with one of them you found her so corseted that it was like waltzing with a letterbox. My one idea everywhere was to get away from the pukka sahibs and their wives.”

Frank was in Rio during the 1918 influenza epidemic. The ferry service

to Nictheroy had been suspended and the cable company had chartered tugs so that the staff could go on duty. The city was half dead. Wagons lumbered past the cable station with bare limbs and hanks of long hair exposed; corpses picked up from doorways for mass burial. Towards the end Frank and the cable men were sleeping beside the instruments. There were heavy casualties among the Western Telegraph staff.

Cable men feared the unhealthy Amazon stations but Frank went on disregarding all the rules and he remained fit. At Manaos, more than eight hundred miles from the river mouth, there was a small, informal cable mess. Operators wore white duck and wooden tamancas, shoes with a peg in the toe. Frank bought a dugout canoe there and explored the

backwaters of the great river. "One of these days you won't come back," remarked the disapproving superintendent. Frank went on exploring. "I found endless amusement on the river," Frank told me. "I saw floating islands coming down with the floods, compact islands six feet high and made up of tree-trunks, rushes, water-lilies, with monkeys as passengers. When the Amazon is in flood it looks as though the whole continent is going adrift. It is a titanic river, so wide that you have to travel hundreds of miles upstream before you can see both shores at the same time. And the green water comes down with such force that it is still a green torrent more than two hundred miles from the coast. You can drink the pure Amazon water far out at sea."

Frank's colleagues drank gin when they woke in the morning. Few took exercise. They did not last long up the Amazon. Frank alarmed his colleagues by swimming among the *piranhas*, the voracious fish that are said to eat a man alive. In fact, said Frank, they touched only bleeding or dead meat. Frank bought mosquito boots but he found them uncomfortable and kicked them off. He was bitten by mosquitoes all the time but escaped malaria and the deadly *vomita proto*, blackwater fever. They called the Amazon "the Cemetery" but it failed to claim Frank Wightman. He suffered from nothing more serious than cramp. It was in Para, where everyone lived in a sweat bath, and he had stopped taking salt tablets. (He classed them with quinine and did not "believe".) While he was perforating tape his right leg seized up,

“a most disturbing sensation”. The supervisor found a relief and Frank limped to the dressing-room and swallowed three tablets from the container. Twenty minutes passed before the pain subsided but the muscles ached for days afterwards. Santos was another dangerous spot for the yellow fever was a menace there. It was still a small town, all cathedrals and brothels. Frank was there for two weeks and he remembered the heat and mosquito bites. Shipload after shipload of Japanese came in to work on the coffee plantations; clean, industrious, utterly obedient, working for tiny wages. Coffee tycoons loved them.

One memory of South America cherished and recalled by Frank all his life was Florianopolis on the Brazilian coast to the south of Rio. He carried a

vision of himself as a young cable man standing in the bows of the steamer as she entered this bay of matchless beauty, gliding between headlands that seemed to touch her sides. Suddenly an inland sea of lapis lazuli flowered at her bows; he saw the jewelled enchantment of a score of islands; the palms and coral beaches; flights of parakeets screaming; and the steamer’s smoke dipping like doom across the bay.

Pernambuco, where Frank spent eight months, was a station of happy memories. He walked for miles along the amazing reef that skirts the shore so closely that it provides a natural harbour. Frank swam at Olinda and climbed on board the wreck of the Mary Russell, a sailing ship that had drifted on to the reef. She had been skinned of everything by the

fishermen but her saloon still had the old contours. Frank imagined the scene in her heyday; fluted pilasters, crimson plush, mirrors in odd places, panels with Glasgow views painted by forgotten artists, a long table and swivel chairs. "Often when I had escaped from the rigours of a cable operator's life I sat in that denuded saloon and imagined that I was a passenger in the days when the oceans of the world were dotted with white pillars of sail," Frank recalled. "The whole of that coast was littered with wrecks of sailing ships and I came to know them all - the ships and their stories." Many sailing ships were still in commission, of course, and most of them were British-owned. Frank said it was startling to stand on a wharf at Pernambuco and hear, suddenly and unexpectedly, the accents of Devon

and Cornwall, Wales, Glasgow and Lancashire. His young eyes were held by the figureheads of kings and queens and the creatures of mythology; women with diadems and chaplets of flowers in their hair. Those figureheads with wide, unseeing eyes were fixed at the bows of white winged ships that were soon to be swept from the oceans by a wisp of smoke.

Frank's contract ended while he was at Pernambuco. His mother wanted him to return to Cape Town and so he resigned. He wanted to sail for England in a steamer called *Professor*, but a yellow fever epidemic was raging and no one was allowed to board the ship. The *Professor* went on to Rio Grande de Norte to load sugar. Frank joined a little train with a wood-burning engine so that he could catch

up with the ship. It was a memorable journey in sweltering heat in a compartment packed with Brazilians. They would not allow Frank to open a window. Frank was relieved when the train stopped at “world’s end” villages, often a mere group of peons’ huts on some hidalgo’s estancia. He drank *calda de cana* served in cunning little cups made of banana palm leaves; and he ate fritters with the scalding flavour of red peppers, served always by Indian women with faces of carved stone.

That night the train stopped at a barn-like railway building, alone in a cactus-haunted desolation. Everyone including the driver and fireman ran for the barn the moment the train stopped. Frank understood later. He dawdled. The gaunt wooden building had two floors and the upper floor was

reached by a ladder. It was cut up into a hundred tiny cubicles separated by low partitions. No windows and no sanitary arrangements. When everyone was inside the huge doors were closed and padlocked. Frank had to sleep in the passage between the two rows of bedrooms. He lay on his baggage and longed for the dawn. Very early an Indian woman appeared, a dark pillar of stillness, with scores of cups of exquisite coffee. Frank drank three cups. Three centavos each.

Next evening he joined the *Professor* thankfully and so reached England. He collected a large amount of pay due to him and sailed for Cape Town in the Kenilworth Castle. The year was 1920. He had passed four years happily in South America and wished in some ways that he had signed another contract. More than a quarter of a

century passed before he saw South America again.

CHAPTER 5

“ROARING FORTIES”

*“Solitude is the home of the strong:
silence their prayer.”*

RAVIGNON.

FOUR sailing ships, all full-riggers, were lying in Table Bay Docks when Frank Wightman returned to Cape Town. One was the *Marlborough Hill*, under the flag of Finland, an iron four-masted barque and she carried skysails. There was the *Monkbarns*, a steel vessel with a flying horse figurehead, famous for her passages in the grain race early in the century. The *Moshulu* was there, another grain race veteran. And there was the *Birkdale*.

Frank looked them over. His father wanted him to join the firm of Wightman and Wightman, wholesale merchants of Cape Town. Frank still

wanted to go to sea and by this time he had learnt to assert himself. He had saved hundreds of pounds during his South American service. The time had come for a holiday of the sort few but Frank Wightman would have chosen. He was determined to work a passage under sail. Frank picked the *Birkdale* because she was faster than the others. She had bows like a destroyer; not a clipper though she had been a record-breaker in her time; a lovely three-masted barque. The *Birkdale* was often in Table Bay during her thirty-five years of voyaging. Her master was the redoubtable Captain Matthew Walmsley, and when Frank met him he was in his prime, a grand, fearless, resourceful seaman.³ Walmsley was one of the men who influenced

³ See appendix: Walmsley, Capt. M.

Frank's life. He was not a tall man but he gave an impression of size because of his heavy build and immense chest. Yet he was light on his feet; almost dainty for such a bulk; the lightness that comes early during a lifetime at sea when a false step may be fatal. Fair, curly hair covered his massive head. His ruddy face was square and heavy, and when his blue eyes were bloodshot, the face was a mask of glowering menace. This was not entirely a misleading idea. It was supported by his voice; low, chesty, grating, sometimes loaded with a threatening quality. Liverpool was his home and the rich Liverpool lilt was in his voice whether he was bellowing into a gale or talking at a bar counter. When he trusted a man, Walmsley became friendly and his voice softened and grew warm and intimate. It was a

startling change. His hands were weapons; large and heavy, with thick fingers. During a difficult spell "on the beach" in the United States he had worked in a circus and boxed in the ring for a living. Walmsley could be the soul of geniality but his crews knew that he was watching them. If they had no work they pretended to be working; they dared not risk an encounter with those bloodshot eyes under the heavy brows. No matter how much he drank he remained fully capable of handling his ship and there were times when his bullying saved the ship and all on board.

In heavy weather the *Birkdale* shipped a lot of water and was difficult to handle. Perhaps it was because of her beam, only thirty-seven feet, while her length was nearly two hundred and fifty. She was built in the 'nineties,

when some sail owners thought they could still challenge steam; a ship of fourteen hundred tons register, very sharp in the bows. She had a handsome panelled saloon with a piano, and in the master's cabin there was a four-poster bed. Walmsley had sailed before the mast in wool clippers. "Jeeze son, I came through the hawse-pipe," he used to say. He had served in a sister-ship, the *Beechdale*; but when he took command of the *Birkdale* back in 1911 he found that by some mysterious process which has always baffled ship-designers the *Birkdale* was faster than the *Beechdale*. Only ships like *Cutty Sark* and *Thermopylae* were faster than the *Birkdale*. But the *Birkdale* was dangerous and many seamen hated the unsheathed steel decks.

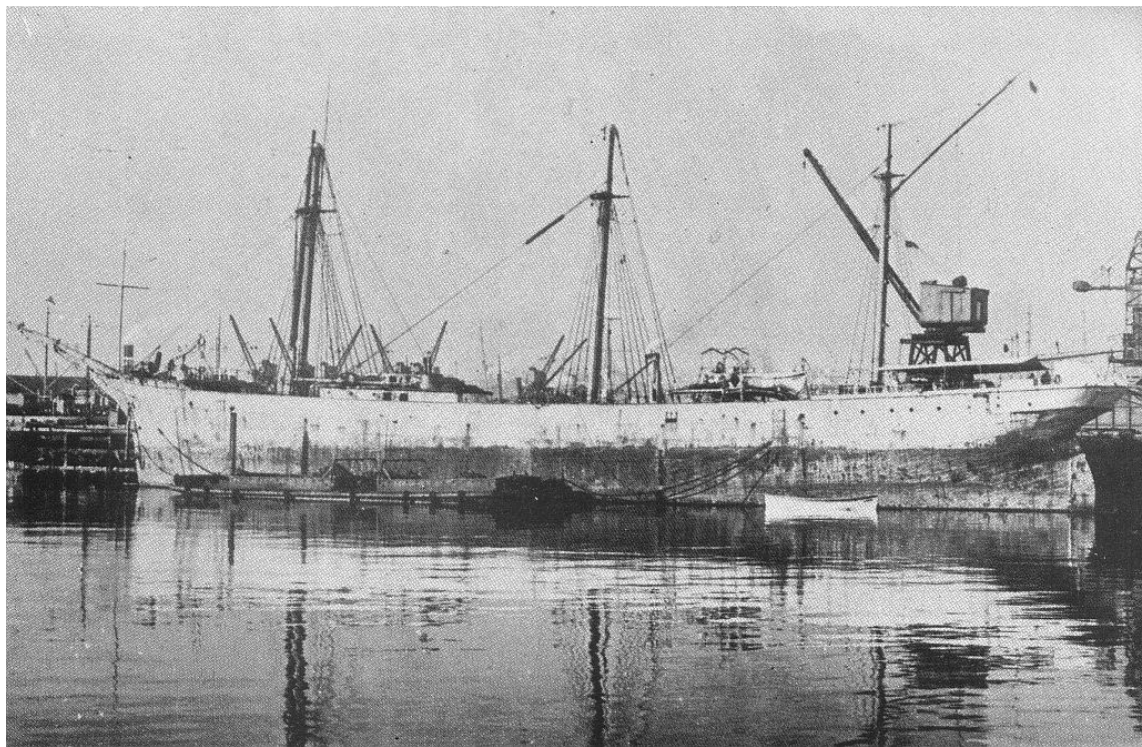
Walmsley loved the *Birkdale*, his first command, yet he drove her much too hard. He could never have stood a slow, lumbering ship. His repair bills were far too high and in the end that finished him with the owner. However, he had the ship for more than a decade. During an early voyage the *Birkdale* was severely damaged by an Atlantic gale and drifted for fifty-two days. Food and water had almost gone when a French steamer towed her into port. Walmsley married during World War I and took his charming American wife to sea with him. She played the saloon piano and the apprentices found the music a pleasant contrast with their hard lives. (Captain, two mates, four apprentices, carpenter, sail maker, cook, steward and eight seamen handled the *Birkdale*; none too many.) Then came

the great tragedy of Walmsley's life. His wife died at sea, just after the ship had rounded Cape Horn and Walmsley read the burial service as the body went over the side in its canvas shroud. No one touched the piano after that episode.

The *Birkdale* was bound from Sabine, Texas, to Melbourne in 1920 with a bulk cargo of sulphur when she was dismasted in the South Atlantic; her steel main topmast, main topgallant mast and fore topgallant mast were all lost. It was a nasty situation but Walmsley cleaned up the mess and sailed her into Table Bay under jury rig. One of her apprentices (later Captain T. Christy senior) told me the story. He and another apprentice went to the New Somerset Hospital on arrival in Cape Town suffering from beri-beri, the nervous disease caused

by lack of certain vitamins. On board the *Birkdale* they had lived on "salt horse" that scoured out the mouth, biscuits with maggots and a grim blend of tea and coffee. Meanwhile the *Birkdale* was rigged at tremendous expense and after ten months in Table Bay Docks she put to sea. Captain Walmsley had married again at the age of forty-five and his young wife Muriel sailed with him. This was not such a happy marriage as the first.

Lloyd's surveyor, old McArthur, used his influence with Walmsley to get Frank Wightman signed on as deckhand aboard the *Birkdale*. Just a passage-worker with a shilling a month pay to bring him under the ship's discipline. Walmsley snorted with laughter. The blue, glowering eyes flicked over Frank like those of a man buying cattle. "Want to go to sea,



“Frank picked the *Birkdale* because she was faster than the others ... a record breaker in her time, a lovely three-masted barque.”

eh? Well, let's see if a touch of the real thing will cure you. Be aboard at five tomorrow morning." They were still rigging her when Frank joined; but while others worked aloft Frank carried sacks of coal on board. He had a bunk in the half-deck with the apprentices and they called him "Squire".

The *Birkdale* left Table Bay in a black south-easter and soon ran into trouble. Near Cape Point the wind swung round to the north and it rained. The new blocks were too small and the clew lines would not render through the blocks, so there was difficulty in shortening sail. The *Birkdale* was caught aback with too much sail on her. Someone shouted: "Man overboard!" A buoy went over with a flare that gave a bright light. The whole ship was beautifully illuminated; she

was like a ship on fire. They backed the main yard and called the roll and all the time that flare was burning with an intense blue-white light, the *Birkdale* outlined in a sort of pale blue brilliance. No one was missing. Frank saw a lighthouse winking in the distance. The next land they saw was Kerguelen, high snow-capped mountains down in the Southern Ocean.

Walmsley often stood on the poop with his arm round Muriel. She was half his age, pretty, with a slender figure and she looked small beside the massive Walmsley. When she was annoyed she broke into waterfront language. Walmsley made Frank go on his knees and brush Muriel's shoes. Frank had the idea that his father had spoken to Walmsley and told him to knock all the seafaring ambition out of him; this may or may not have been

true. Walmsley was a bully but he eased up a bit when he found that Frank was not shirking.

One day Walmsley called Frank up to the poop when the *Birkdale* was racing along under t'gallants. Walmsley despised yachtsmen at that time, though he had reason to be grateful to one later when he was "on the beach". Frank climbed the lee poop ladder. Walmsley stepped forward, grasped Frank's sou'wester lashings at the throat and led him to the wheel. "Stand over this lad - I'm giving him the wheel", Walmsley ordered the helmsman. Then he turned to Frank. "Now you Table Bay yachtsman, you're going to steer a ship - and I'm watching you."

What the master did not know was that Frank had been taking secret lessons in steering at night. Frank sent up a

prayer, nevertheless, as his hands closed over the spokes. He brought her up gently to meet the onset of an encroaching sea so that onset and swing were neutralised. The *Birkdale* went tearing on, compass dead steady. Frank spoke to the ship under his breath: "I love you - don't betray me. I love you - don't let me down." It went on for a long time. Frank watched the lean body dipping away under his handling and still he prayed. At last Walmsley sent a relief and spoke to Frank. "Not so bad, son. If only I'd had you with me before your balls had dropped I'd have made a sailor of you. Get below."

"I was young and I loved it," Frank recalled. "I forgot the hazing, cleaning the 'heads', all the insults. Two hundred and fifty feet of steel answering to a touch! But she was terribly

dangerous. Walmsley was often drunk or in his cabin with the new wife. McWattie the mate had just been nursed through an attack of D.T.'s by Ma Rees of the Docks Cafe.⁴ Walmsley used to give the mate one drink a day to keep him going and the man was ravenous for booze. Walmsley drank a lot but he was still capable when he was drunk. Cape brandy they drank, pretty raw stuff in those days. Trouble was, Walmsley was trying to show Muriel how the ship could travel. Tom Christy, the

senior apprentice, would say: 'Silly old bugger, he's carrying too much sail.' Christy was a six-footer, a magnificent seaman. I don't think the *Birkdale* would have reached Australia without Christy and I was always glad when he was on the poop. He took charge of a watch when the mate could not be trusted. We lost fourteen sails on that passage, all new canvas. You don't use old canvas down there in the 'roaring forties'. It was a tough passage. Christy said so."

Walmsley had been in sail and sail only all his life. Several of his crew had never known a steamer. Frank used to sit in the galley listening to the sail maker and the carpenter talking to each other in the jargon of the sea and speaking of ships he had known only in the pages of Basil Lubbock. It was mercifully warm in the galley at night

⁴ McWattie appears in the reminiscences of Leslie Morton, author of "The Long Wake" (Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1968). The son of a wealthy cotton family, McWattie served his apprenticeship in the famous four-masted barque *Pegasus*. Morton describes McWattie as "a charming man, a bit of a brute when he had liquor in him".

with the stove banked. Frank sat in the doorway so that he would not be toasted. Then the mate's whistle would shrill and everyone would have to tumble out and go aloft. Frank said he was an anachronism among those old shellbacks. The sail maker was over seventy but when they went aloft he would race up the rigging and pass over Frank as though he was not there. It was too dark to see the ratlines. After years at sea those men could not understand the cities any longer, if they ever did, and they burned out their lives at sea because it was the only life they knew. To them it was not remarkable; but the life had made those men remarkable. Frank used to watch their faces as they talked. They spoke of their encounters with a power untamed. Their postures were not consciously heroic; they spoke as they

did because this was their fate, their lot in life; the lot of men with simple minds and great hearts. Men, as Conrad said, "hard to command, but easy to inspire". They burned their lives out in the service of the ships they loved; and they counted it no sacrifice, these children of the sea, with their tattooed and hairy bodies. They talked always of ships as other men talk of women, in tones that ranged from bitterness to admiration. "Aye, I joined her in Pensacola, nineteen-o-one. Proper sow she were." But when the carpenter spoke of the *Loch Torridon* he declared: "Bonny ship, and she could go. Aussie to the West Coast with coal. Must 'ave bin in ninety-eight." Sometimes they argued over a ship and the raised voices were filled with sea lore and seamanship and the verities of the sea. There was

an old Finn on board with a name all consonants and only one vowel. He never opened his mouth except to his old shipmates. He could hardly speak English but he jumped to every order. His vast knowledge of sail told him what was wanted before the order came.

“Sails” and “Chips” had heard the legend of Frank leaving a comfortable home and “breaking his mother’s heart”. They had seen his sea-chest coming alongside in the family limousine and all this concealed something they were determined to uncover. (Frank said they were sure he was escaping from the police.) So Frank spent much of his spare time in their tiny cabin where the port was never opened; where the atmosphere caught at the back of his throat and made his eyes water; where the ashes from

scoured-out pipe bowls and the scraps of discarded food gave such a cushioning effect to the deck underfoot that it would have disgraced the richest carpet. They were suspicious of Frank at first; but they saw him with others of the lesser kind stand obediently aside when they gestured in the galley and squirted their tobacco juice out on to the deck. In exchange for gems of ancient sea lore in their reeking cabin Frank was put to an inquisition which revealed their own simple minds. They had stayed young in heart, creatures of the eternal sea. They had surrendered their lives to the sea and now they were old. And they were groping after the impulse that had driven the son of a rich man to go to sea. “Sails” was most persistent. After viewing Frank unwinkingly for a spell he would blow

a blue-white spear of smoke that struck his face. "Could your father buy this packet?" Frank answered: "I expect so." The weathered faces turned to each other in a conspiratorial exchange of glances that Frank never fathomed. Then the old men broke into chuckles and "Chips" commented: "So you join this starvation packet - at a shillin' a month!"

Frank left them and went out into the night. It was so black that he felt he could reach out and grab a solid handful as the ship, under lower topsails and fore-topmast staysail, drove thundering on through the blackness. Yes, there was no doubt about Frank's love for the *Birkdale*. He swore that the only blemish on those shining memories was the interminable length of the nights down south and the shortness of the days.

Nights so black that while he kept his watch as fo'c'stle lookout he wondered what he was there for. They were in forty-five degrees south. "Watch out for ice," the mate told him. At regular intervals he sounded the bell, echoing the bell rung by the helmsman on the poop. If an iceberg the size of a mountain had reared up dead ahead he would not have seen it fifty feet away. It was a gesture, putting a man there. It would have looked well in the logbook if the logbook had survived.

Always the greatest charm lay in steering, watching her swinging obediently to a touch of the wheel. Frank loved her then; she had become a gigantic yacht, docile yet dangerous; fleeing into the night in a pandemonium of seas with the skirl of the gale in her rigging. In daylight she

was different. Frank could move his eyes from the compass card just for a second and watch the run of the seas on each side of the hull. It gave a confidence no helmsman could feel at night; for what is a lighted card as an indication of what the fell night intends?

Frank spent hours aloft overhauling buntlines and renewing robands, the short lines securing the square sails to the jackstays. It was a magical world for him up there among the singing top-hammer. The ship was a far-off, narrow sliver of steel on which men moved. When she was travelling fast the sounds of the hull's battle with the sea were muted and heard through the full-throated plaint of the rigging. Frank tried to capture the sound as he slid his knife across a frayed seizing and drew a fresh length from his belt.

It was something like a wind driving through a forest. It was immense but never jagged. A great voice with every taut rope and shroud and brace as chords. It was the texture of the wind. In a spanking breeze it was all the basso profundos of the world humming deep in their throats. When the wind was formidable an enormous choir of mezzo sopranos chanted their head notes. Frank had many of the menial tasks but the memories that lived with him were his hours aloft, his tricks at the wheel.

The *Birkdale* was never hard-mouthed, even in heavy weather. Walmsley only sent two men to the wheel when she was travelling so fast, when conditions were so dangerous that instant helm movements were essential. It was remarkably hard to swing her rudder when she was doing fifteen knots,

especially for a small man like Frank. When he had to bring the spokes up he braced his feet on the raised grating; but when he brought the spokes down he often had to hang on the top spoke and jerk his body to coax it down. Often the gearing was not enough. But a man on the lee wheel could thrust up while the helmsman dragged the spokes down. Yet the *Birkdale* was never “a cow to steer”. She was very narrow and her sail plan was lofty. She had to be watched in heavy weather, but she was not unhandy. It was the height of her masts that made her dangerous. If the helmsman let her broach-to while running hard before the great seas, if her sails came aback, the masts might carry away.

When the *Birkdale* was running before and rolling the force in the sails tended to slew her round. It was a slow, deep

rolling, unlike the rolling of a steamer, and the helmsman had to anticipate the slewing effect. Sometimes the wake resembled trellis work. When a good man was at the wheel it was straight as a rifle barrel all the way back to the horizon. Frank was ready for the slewing when he first took the wheel. He stood there alone with the *Birkdale* in his hands. She was running under everything but royals, logging twelve knots. He had two hours of it; two of the fullest and most rewarding hours of his life. For years he had lived with the idea of sailing a full-rigged ship and now he had a thoroughbred under control. In his two crowded hours he never had to use more than three spokes of the wheel. It was a tribute to the ship rather than the helmsman. She steered like a yacht. Frank heard the sound of her life in his ears and the

feel of her life in his feet. His hands were on her heart. He was fulfilled.

There came a day when a helmsman did allow the *Birkdale* to broach-to. She was travelling very fast under two lower topsails and it was blowing harder and harder all the time. Frank said he could hardly stand on the poop. The fore topsail was made of very heavy canvas but it blew out so that she did not have enough sail to keep her head off. She came round. Walmsley was drunk but he felt the difference in the motion and he was on deck immediately. He struck the helmsman and sent another man to take the wheel. The *Birkdale* ran along in the trough and although she was in ballast the seas poured over her decks. Walmsley called for all hands and ordered the men to lower one of the jibs. Frank was standing in the lee of

the mainmast and the old sail maker pulled him away. "Keep clear of the sticks - they may go overboard," he warned. Frank had never seen such heavy rolling. Walmsley sent Christy and two good seamen on to the foresail yard. They could not lower the foresail but they goose-winged it. Then the ship came under control again.

"I thought we were finished," Frank declared. "I thought one of her chain-plates would pull out and a mast would go over the side. Yet I was still interested. That was where Walmsley was so fine - in a crisis. I did not mind the way he cursed me. He thought he was hurting me but he was not. He was a drunken bully and yet I admired him. I did not care what he said to me as long as I had that lovely ship."

Frank said the tot of rum was a heavy weather tradition in sailing ships but only once did he see Walmsley honour it. That was when the *Birkdale* was back on her course after broaching-to. As each man stood before Walmsley, holding out his mug, Walmsley said "Water?" All said: "No Sir." Then Frank's turn came. He said: "Please Sir." Walmsley poured the water and said with deep contempt: "Our yachtsman." It was a rum Frank had never tasted before. When he got into his bunk he went out as though he had been pole-axed. The effect was almost immediate. It affected the apprentices in the same way. Frank heard one of them utter a strange cry just before he swam out into insensibility. It was the cry a man would make after receiving a blow.

One evening in the far south Frank had come down from aloft after setting sail about an hour after they had taken it in and he was standing with a young seaman whose screaming profanity on the t'gallant yard had kept him listening in awe. Gurney the seaman flung an arm across Frank's shoulder. Bending down he shouted: "Bloody awful life, Wighty." But Frank's eyes were on a fume of foam patterns that passed swiftly by; he could have leant over and touched them as she rolled. They were deep blue in the darkness, and the delicacy of their fashioning, and their speed as they dipped from the pile of water under her lee-bow, and shot, sparkling by, filled him with exhilaration. 'Oh, ah dunno, Gurney' Frank said. Gurney flung away with a curse and Frank heard the clang of the steel f'c'sle door. For a spell Frank

lingered there with that sight before his eyes, ears thrumming to the huge organ-notes from aloft; then he weaved his way aft over the long steel deck, hands tucked under armpits. Down the half-deck ladder, so steep that you had to make sure your heel was on the next step before you put your weight on it, and he turned up the lamp that swung on a deck-beam. He shook the three apprentices, Christy, Raymond and Hersey. "Christ, aren't you out of your sacks yet? You heard the bells." Christy shot upright from full-sleep to full-awake as he always did. "A good watch-keeper keeps his bunk till he is called," Christy replied in a voice that addressed the universe. Hersey, with a face drugged with sleep, was sitting in a bunk fighting to get a leg into a pair of "fearnought" trousers already encased in oilskins.

Then the three young bodies followed each other up the ladder. Frank dropped his oilskins and slid luxuriously into a bunk. The organ-note of his racing sweetheart was dimmed with sleep.

"Heavy weather in all the other oceans is heavy weather but down in the south heavy weather means those swells that seem to belong to something outside man's experience on earth," Frank told me. "Once in the early hours all hands and the old sail maker and carpenter were four hours on the main yard, furling the mainsail. Four hours! In the shrieking squalls and cutting hail. As an experience that was something new to me. We started on the main royal when the wind was only fresh, but it was blowing harder all the time and I felt as though I was a mile above the deck. She rolled so heavily that we

could not keep our feet on the foot-rope. Only by gripping the yard with hard young bellies and strong thighs did we stay up there, for our hands were full. 'One hand for yourself and one for the ship' was coined by a landsman. My sou'wester lifted off my head in one of the squalls and nearly throttled me before the chin-strap broke. Then the hail had my ears and it felt as though someone was jabbing them with red-hot barbed wire. My oilskins were threadbare. I wore a thick jersey over everything. Often I was soaked through but out of the wind I worked up a steamy heat inside my clothes. In bad weather we just turned in wearing everything, tugging the blankets up to our chins or over our heads. The half-deck had all apertures well plugged so we woke up in a sort of hot poultice. Going aloft

straight from our bunks was sometimes bitter; we seemed to have been robbed of all that luxurious steamy heat. The final triumph of the wind came when the shirt next to your skin turned cold. Then for some odd reason you felt wet, although you had been soaked all the time. But when you had reached a certain degree of coldness it could get no worse. I suppose the body took over."

Frank said he had seen enormous swells on several oceans, the largest of all on the Pacific; but when heavy weather overtook the *Birkdale* to the south of Kerguelen he saw world-girdling swells. They came from the west, their heads separated by nearly half a mile. When the *Birkdale* started up the face of a swell Frank realised with awe the forces astir on the Southern Ocean. The swells came

down on the ship patterned with sunlight and cloud shadows and the patterning seemed to give them even more solidity. It was not an impression of water at all. That such an immense volume could move with such speed, in silence, rocked all that Frank knew of the physical world. He felt that if the coming gale held the power to turn over one of those high ridges, no ship ever made by man would survive.

Later, when the *Birkdale* was in the grip of the weather, the swells were even higher, yet never did one turnover as a sea does on a beach. The most threatening movement was a sinister creaming at the ridge. During the gale the sky was a low ceiling of scudding cloud with a light at noon that was not much brighter than the radiance of a full moon. Then the oncoming swells were like veined

marble, dark and solid. When the ship was picked up by one of them while running she seemed to be mounting the sky. Frank looked out over an immense sweep of ocean (his palms bleeding) and saw those incredible swells all the way back to the horizon. They were no threat to the ship but they came between her and her driving force, the wind. Lesser seas that overran the great swells attacked the ship. Those seas were high enough to storm aboard over each rail as she rolled, so that her decks were filled from rail to rail. What distinguished such an experience from heavy weather in other oceans was the immensity of the threat. Frank, said it was as though the ship had left this planet and was being subjected to a new violence hitherto unrecorded by human brains.

So the day came when the bonny *Birkdale* made her landfall at Cape Leeuwin and Walmsley talked about reaching Sydney in record time. They were under full sail now, royals and all, but the wind fell light and all she made was a fast passage. A tug brought her into Newcastle, New South Wales. Frank had a long hot bath at the "Flying Angel" and then he went to see a doctor. He had been in a motor-cycle accident some time before leaving Cape Town, but had made light of the damage to his ribs for fear of missing the *Birkdale*. During the cold nights down south his breathing had worried him and his chest had been painful. "You should never have been in that ship at all," said the doctor. He punctured Frank's lung and drew off the fluid.

"Is there anything incurably wrong?" Frank asked.

"Not at your age," replied the doctor. "But you'll have to sign off and go home. Then you'll get over it."

Frank lived on board the *Birkdale* while he was waiting for a passage. The mate was still crazy for liquor and he used to slip Frank the money. "Look here Shorty - I want four bottles. Doesn't matter what it is but don't come back without it." Frank consulted a friendly barmaid. "There's this," said the barmaid, swinging a bottle off the shelf. "Has it kick?"

"It has kick," she replied, eyeing Frank critically. "You interested?" "Not for myself."

Frank hid the bottles under his shirt. The apprentices would have met him at the gangway if they had suspected

his mission. Walmsley would have confiscated the liquor. The barmaid watched Frank stowing the bottles away. "What's going on here?" she asked. "You're always coming in here for that stuff but you don't look like a feller that puts it away." She never solved the mystery.

Frank told me that he never saw the *Birkdale* looking more beautiful than she did on the day he left her. He sailed from Sydney to Cape Town in a liner. It was strange, he said, having his bag carried on board. When it was all over Frank the stoic looked back at the frustrated boy who had left school feeling that he had been deprived of going to sea in sail. He wanted to tap the young shoulder and point to the *Birkdale* creaming the seas on her way to Australia, and murmur: "It is your own but you have not come to it yet."

The *Birkdale* was the heroine of that episode. Frank was the lover. In his devotion, in spite of the pain in his chest, he enshrined her and saw her glorified, long, slender, lovely, drenched in mystery and power and magic. He had stood at her wheel when the wake was a streaking whiteness; he had watched the far bowsprit caressing the skyline. Young he was and exhilarated because he had the skill to control her. A tall ship under the hands of a young man; tall, gaunt, valiant and docile. He had served her but she was eternally beyond him, entering his heart yet for ever withholding herself. And on a wild night she died on Lobos Isle in the strait of Magellan. Her back was broken. A tower of spars crashed amid the crying of the gulls and the *Birkdale* was finished.

CHAPTER 6

BIRKDALE TO WYLO

*In the world, a man lives in his own
age;
in solitude, in all the ages.*

W. MATHEWS

IT WAS in a waterfront tavern known to many of the world's seafarers that I first met Frank Wightman. After that I found him every week-end in the sheltered corner of dockland where we kept our yachts. Now I find myself looking back in wonder on those vanished characters, those men with sea-tanned faces and calloused, hands who gathered in the tavern and in the small-craft basin at the docks. Some of them influenced me and one of them probably changed the whole course of Frank's life. Gaze upon Frank against this array of adventurers, this background of the wide oceans.

Seamen called the tavern the "first and last bar" because it stood in a strategic position at the main gateway to Table Bay Docks. Happily they smelt the land and the whiffs of alcohol that drifted into Dock Road; and some of them saw nothing more of Cape Town than the sporting prints and Georgian nudes, the china rum and whisky barrels of the Queen's Hotel. Others who liked barmaids moved into the city but if they had money on their return they called again at the Queen's before sailing for the tropics or the south ice. It was a necessary precaution. Probably there would be no more drinks for them until they reached the Rio waterfront or Molly's place in Sydney.

Though the Queen's was neither royal nor luxurious it had atmosphere. It drew week-end sailors like myself

because it was near the yacht basin. We could not afford to lose our little ships and the open anchorage off the pier, exposed to raging south-east gales was often dangerous. We preferred the coal-dust, the rats and noises of the safe harbour. The yacht club rented the clock tower, a tall building that had once been a signal station. One room had stained-glass windows and handsome oak furniture; Frank and some other members slept there; others stowed odd gear, drew fresh water for their boats and sat round talking. I had a small cabin yawl called Amitia moored under the clock tower, so I ate and slept on board and visited the Queen's for inspiration and refreshment. At the Queen's I encountered all sorts of men; and some of them upset the facts that I had been taught to regard as gospel truth.

They had swallowed with their rough food the salt water that often threatened to drown them. At the Queen's they met old shipmates, told yarns such as Conrad and Masefield would have loved, drank together for the last time on this globe and parted. At the clock tower were other great narrators and some of the tales they told were true.

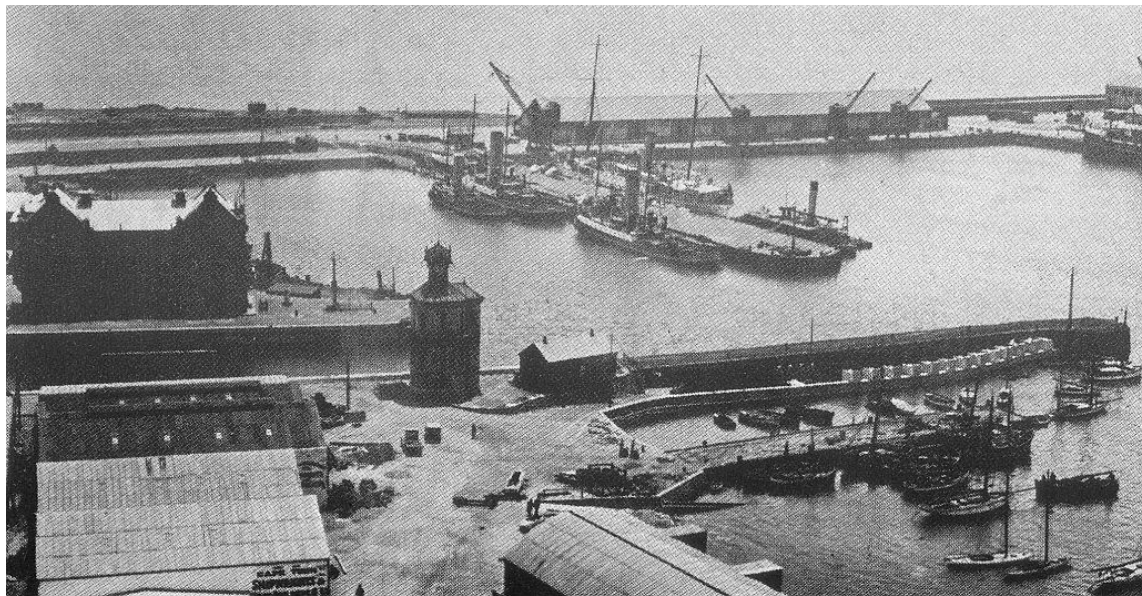
One old pensioner named Charles Broker owned an ex-naval pinnace named *Theodora*, a narrow-gutted hooker but very slow going to windward. He sailed three thousand miles in her, up and down the west coast, and got into trouble with the police on his return. They said he had been looking for diamonds. There was "Dad" Bisset, a mahogany-faced ancient who had spent half his life at sea and the other half prospecting for

gold. At eighty he was still doing a job as mate of a tiny survey vessel. He made superb coffee when I called on him and offered to lend me the "Occult Review". A waterfront character who often collected a few shillings from the clock tower crowd was Russian Smith, an eccentric vagrant who lived in a cabin under an old wooden jetty. He had a long beard, a cudgel and a dog; and he roamed the docks calling on ships' cooks and eating free meals. According to legend he had been an officer in one of the Czar's crack regiments. He was crazy, always dodging imaginary bullets. "The sharks come and look at me at night and I talk to them," Russian Smith informed me.

One day I was asked to take an enormous man from the Northern Transvaal out sailing. He knew nothing of

the sea but I soon discovered that his brain matched his muscles. Dirk Eloff was his name and he was President Kruger's grandson. I gave him his first lesson in sailing. Something about that experience must have gripped him for he ordered a large yacht. The launching of Sarie Marais was a riotous occasion even for the clock tower. Then he furnished her with huge jars of wine and the complete works of Freud and sailed off to Panama with his wife and a crew of three. Yes, he learned navigation on the way out of text-books and reached Panama safely.

Often the most brilliant legal brain South Africa had ever known was to be seen and heard in the Queen's bar. Mr. Beauclerk Upington K.C. would drink with a fireman or a ship's carpenter without an atom of condescension. Tall and lean, he had a pene



The yacht club rented the clock tower, a tall building that had once been a signal station.

trating yet humorous eye. He summed up his fellow men unerringly and heaven preserve the smug or superior person who uttered idiocies in his distinguished presence. Upington was often embarrassing for he spared no one who annoyed him. Fortunately the Queen's provided him with a congenial audience. He was himself a fearless seaman, owner of that legendary racing cruiser the cutter-rigged *Innisfallen*. I sailed with him for years. At one period Frank sailed with him. Upington's splendid cutter was over-canvassed for Cape gales but I never felt nervous when Upington was at the tiller. In court his reputation was tremendous. At sea his determination inspired us all. I saw his finest qualities during a cruise when he was seriously injured and in great pain. It

sickened me but Upington lay still, almost silent throughout his ordeal.

Into this circle came, for six months, that great American circumnavigator Skipper Harry Pidgeon.⁵ It was in 1924 that Pidgeon sailed his yawl *Islander* up to the clock tower and moored her near my *Amitia*. Pidgeon was to have a tremendous influence on Frank's life; Pidgeon, the man who had escaped from the land to the freedom of the oceans. But I doubt whether Frank realised in 1924 that fourteen years later he would be building a replica of Pidgeon's *Islander* and following Pidgeon's wake across the South Atlantic. Pidgeon's boat was a yawl with angular hull and a large coach-roof, and already during this voyage round

⁵ See appendix: Pidgeon, Harry.

the world he had proved her seaworthiness. Pidgeon was not a born sailor. His ancestors were English farming folk who had settled in Iowa, far from the sea. Pidgeon described himself to me as “farmer, photographer and landlubber”; he told me that he did not set eyes on the sea until he was eighteen years old. He built his first boat in Alaska, where he was a hunter. Then he constructed a houseboat near Minneapolis and spent a year drifting down the Mississippi and earning a living by taking portraits of the river people.

Pidgeon taught himself to build a seagoing yacht by studying books in the Los Angeles library. There his *Islander* began to take shape in 1917. He was nearly fifty when he set out round the world for the first time. The boat had cost him one thousand dollars

and eighteen months of hard work. When he put to sea he had never fixed position by sextant but he had read the books and he made accurate landfalls. “Navigation is easy”, Pidgeon told me. “Seamanship, the ability to care for and handle a vessel under all conditions, is acquired only by practice.”

Frank Wightman and I became friendly with this wiry, grey-eyed, happy American. He spent more than two months under the clock tower and gave a memorable lecture for members of the yacht club. Then came an adventure that nearly ended his cruise. Worn out after a long spell at the tiller while trying to clear the land, Pidgeon fell asleep. His yacht was carried inshore and beached herself miraculously on a sandy beach, one of the few safe places on the rocky coast to the north of Saldanha. The *Islander*

was refloated and Pidgeon came back thankfully to the clock tower.

There we came to know him well. He joined us at supper during the week-ends and sat yarning until after midnight. Talking is a luxury when a man has been alone for months at sea. Frank and I were listening to a character such as one seldom meets in this century. Pidgeon spoke with an unconscious art that never appeared in his book. He had a dry sense of humour. He was keenly interested, in his fellow human beings. Newspapers called him a sea hermit but he assured us that he sailed alone only because it was almost impossible to find the right shipmate. He was full of sea wisdom, far more intelligent than many successful men on shore. His outlook on money was unusual. I remember that he was asked to give a second

lecture but he declined. "I've still got a dollar," he explained with his merry twinkle.

Little ships like *Islander* ride over the huge seas that liners take on board. The building of *Islander* was a job of work done well and it saved Pidgeon's life many times. Crossing the ocean in her meant great discomfort but not death. "I am battered and battered and battered in dirty weather until I wonder why I ever left the shore," Pidgeon told us. "But there's no fool like an old fool. When it's over I forget it."

Frank and I looked round Pidgeon's cabin. There were few of the racks or lockers found in other boats; all his possessions lay in one impressive heap beneath the coach-roof; charts and books in folds of spare canvas, tinned provisions and cameras mixed up with

marlinspikes, water jars, coils of rope. "My stuff can't fall any further," Pidgeon explained. "I seem to know just where to put my hand on what I want."

People often asked Pidgeon what happened when he went to sleep. Well, the ship sailed on. He trimmed his sails, lashed his tiller, and the *Islander* then followed the course set, anywhere from close-hauled to running dead before the wind. That saved a lot of hard labour. Only when nearing land did Pidgeon lose sleep. He could not leave the ship to roar along by herself when land might loom up out of the night, so he was usually a tired man when he made port. It was the penalty for sailing alone and he paid it cheerfully.

His physical endurance was astounding. One meal a day, at sea or on

shore, was enough for Skipper Pidgeon. "I had a good breakfast today and now someone has invited me to dinner tonight - and I don't want to go," Pidgeon once remarked to us. "No use overloading the stomach." He cooked his meal on a wood stove in the cabin and preferred fresh vegetables and fruit to tinned provisions. He never smoked but he was no fanatic about diet, drink or tobacco.

Pidgeon never visited the Queens. The day I met Frank Wightman there was one of the few occasions when I saw Frank in the bar. Frank sat on a high stool, a glass of gin and tonic before him. He was drinking slowly and listening to a waterman who knew me and brought me into the conversation. They had met by arrangement, the waterman and Frank, to discuss

putting down a mooring at the clock tower for Frank's little half-decked yawl *Typee*. I gathered that Frank had only just returned to Cape Town after years in the cable service in South America, followed by a sailing ship adventure and a job in the Belgian Congo. He had spent some time in Elizabethville working for the Union Miniere as a bookkeeper. "I had read Joseph Conrad on the Congo and I wanted to see the country," Frank remarked casually. "There was no sea, so I left." Probably that was not the whole Congo story. Anyway, he had come back with enough money to buy *Typee*. He sailed with a bronzed young man named Llewellyn Thomas who became his lifelong friend.⁶

Another memorable personality moves along the old water-front, Jasper Segallas the yacht club caretaker. He was a Greek who had come on shore from a full-rigged ship early this century; and his years at sea had given him qualities that made him indispensable at the club. A sallow, gaunt man was Jasper with aquiline features and high cheekbones; the sort of face El Greco would have painted. Jasper lived for the Club. His staccato talk was not always easy to follow when he was trying to explain the fine points of seamanship. A kindly man, he gave shelter at the club to a horde of hungry cats; he told members they prevented the rats from eating the sails. I shall always remember the concerted squeal of delight from the cat army when Jasper opened the door with a parcel of fish. Jasper was illiterate, like many

⁶ See appendix: Thomas, Llewellyn.

old sailor men of his day. His sarcastic replies to silly questions became famous in the club. I was present one day when Jasper was at work on a complicated wire splice, a seamanlike feat of a high order. "Where did you learn to do that, Jasper?" inquired a young member casually. Jasper pointed to the club library and showed his three long yellow teeth in a most peculiar smile. "I look in da book," he replied. I noticed, however, that Jasper treated Frank Wightman as an equal. They were both sailing ship men.

One more clock tower face returns, a small, thin man with a grey moustache and steel-rimmed spectacles. Scott was his name. He seemed to have been born with a foot-rule in one hand, chalk in the other, ready to illustrate any point in ship construction. He was a grand yacht builder, trained at

Cowes. "Give me a bottle of Cape brandy and I'll lay down a battleship," old Scott declared. I sold *Amitia* and ordered a five-tone sloop *Lulu*, first of a class in the yacht club, designed by Norman Ross. Day after day I watched her taking shape under Scott's keen eyes. I saw her as a jarrah stem and false keel and oak transom. Then the steamed oak timbers grew out of her like the ribs of a skeleton. The planking was hammered on to the frame and riveted with hundreds of copper fastenings. When you buy a yacht you buy the sea. At last she was ready for launching. "It's not the boat so much, but the man who handles her," remarked Scott, gazing hard at me. Frank came out sailing with me in *Lulu* and ordered a sister ship, *Lothair*. I did not hear Scott giving Frank any such warning.

I sailed against *Lothair* in a series of races knowing full well that a boat handled by those superb helmsmen Wightman and Thomas would be 'unbeatable. But I never imagined that young Wightman was a second Pidgeon, living only for the day when he, too, could sail round the world in a replica of Pidgeon's *Islander*. I knew that Frank was a man of education, widely read, with a pleasant and cultured voice that revealed no sort of accent. His blue eyes were alert and steady and held something of the genius that shone from Upington; but it was a different genius. Frank had a welter of fair hair in those days. His nose was a remarkable feature, a Roman nose, well-shaped but really too large for the sun-tanned face. If he was sensitive about his appearance he managed to conceal it. Yachtsmen

called him "Lofty" or "Shorty" in a s'illy, good-natured way and he would reply without rancour. I saw a flash of irritation pass over his face when he was addressed as "Wighty". Obviously he liked the name Frank best. Frank Armstrong Wightman, twenty-eight years of age when I first met him in the Queen's bar. Five feet two inches.

Frank had gone into his father's business, which had fallen on evil days during the depression years. James Wightman's health was failing and he had his wife and two daughters to support; and so the dutiful yet inwardly rebellious son surrendered himself to the drudgery of office routine. Longing for the week-ends and the sun, he settled down to book-keeping and collecting debts. "I could never go through that period again," Frank declared. "We dealt in every-

thing from baby powder to canned soups, from maple syrup to soap. There were two travellers, but after a time I joined them on the road to whip up more business. I came to know every Commercial Hotel in the Cape Province and every little country store. I hated the boozing, especially in the middle of the day; but I had to drink to get orders. Sometimes I managed to pour the drinks away without being noticed. As a debt collector I was remarkably successful. I would go into a shop and say firmly: 'This bill has got to be paid.' Rather to my surprise the money came in. When my father died the business was solvent and I was able to hand over my father's share and a goodwill payment to my mother. Then I was free at last from the market place and I had seven

hundred pounds of my own in the bank."

Seven hundred pounds - and a small yacht with a cabin. Frank lived on board *Lothair* and dreamed of the time when he would sail round the world in a small yacht. He did not care to do it while his mother was alive; in this respect he was not only dutiful but affectionate. But he made his plans and preparations. Once he set off on a cruise with his mother's approval, intending to make the island of St. Helena and then return to Table Bay. This would have been no mean achievement, for the run is fifteen hundred miles each way and the sailor without an engine must cover a much greater distance. Frank, the fearless Frank, started off happily in *Lothair*,

and anchored at Dassen Island⁷ before setting off across the ocean. Here the usually sure-footed Frank fell down the fore-hatch and broke a leg. In agony, after a long effort, he hauled himself on deck and made a distress signal. Doctors hurried from Cape Town in a fast yacht and brought him back.⁸ I visited Frank in hospital, a strange place to find the healthy sailor. He was once again a stoic, in great pain but talking to his friends.

It was during this period (in 1936) that our old friend Harry Pidgeon came sailing into Table Bay again. Here was the old sea-tanned Pidgeon again, sixty-six years of age and still leading the very life that Frank had mapped out for himself. This time Frank came

to know the wandering American more intimately and they became close friends. “What’s the hurry?” Pidgeon would ask as Frank sculled past *Islander*. So the eager Frank would go on board and listen to one of the greatest living exponents of the art of lone cruising. Pidgeon talked about everything; not only the hazards of the sea but his early life as a gold-miner and trapper in Alaska, his adventures in a houseboat on the Mississippi and the Mae West type women who came on board. There was a strong Puritan vein in the old sea wanderer and he dropped his voice when he mentioned these affairs.

Frank Wightman gave little thought to food and ate sparingly all his life. Pidgeon revealed the same lack of interest in meals. He drank only water and ate rice of the wrong sort, the

⁷ See appendix: Dassen Island.

⁸ See appendix: Wood, Dr. J. Burn.

white starchy rice. His medicine chest contained only aperients, which surprised Frank, for the old man seemed to be a child of nature who should have been immune from such ailments. One day Pidgeon was ill and Frank asked whether he could get him anything. "Raspberry juice - I guess that will fix my stomach," Pidgeon replied. Frank bought some tins of raspberries and Pidgeon recovered very soon. He believed in raspberries. Probably the most important item on Pidgeon's menu was his home-made wholemeal bread. He showed Frank how to bake this famous loaf and Frank followed the Pidgeon recipe for most of his life.

Before he sailed away Harry Pidgeon looked hard at Frank Wightman and said quietly: "You've got the great sickness." He meant the wanderlust,

the urge to cross the oceans and make strange landfalls; and of course it was true. Soon after Pidgeon's departure Frank decided to build a boat to the *Islander* design. He had never put a box together up to that time and he knew nothing of carpentry; in fact he had handled tools so seldom that people said he could not drive a nail in straight. However, he read text books on yacht construction and lived with the *Islander* plans. A local designer warned him that the "hard chine" design would be difficult but Frank knew he would overcome all problems. The yacht club gave him permission to build his boat on the mole near the slipway. Frank laid down the enormous keel timbers. One keel bolt was an inch longer than Frank himself. Members started bringing their chairs on to the mole.

“Come and watch Wighty and have a good laugh,” they told each other. As the boat took shape they prophesied that Frank would need two years to finish her. The scoffing and sarcasm annoyed him so much at one period that he worked at night to avoid onlookers. As he gained experience he worked by eye and instinct. At the end of exactly twelve months the yacht was launched and those who had jeered at Frank came to applaud the little builder’s successful effort. Frank named the yacht *Wylo* after the sailing ship in Longfellow’s poems.⁹

Reclamation of Table Bay started shortly before World War II and yachtsmen were told that their moorings would soon become dry land. They had to move to other harbours.

⁹ See appendix: Wylo.

During this crisis Frank’s mother died. He was free to roam the oceans of the world but with war in the air it was difficult to plan the cruise. He sailed to Saldanha Bay, to find a safe anchorage and await events.¹⁰

Among the first people Frank met at Saldanha was Captain Matthew Walmsley. The master mariner had fallen on evil days after Frank had left the *Birkdale* and he told Frank the whole sad tale. There had been a court case over the repair bill for the rigging and Walmsley had been sacked. Walmsley found a berth as skipper of a little coasting vessel named *Louise*, a cutter with an engine and a crew of one coloured man, Jantjie. The *Louise* ran between Table Bay and Hondeklip Bay, the normal passage being about

¹⁰ See appendix: Saldanha Bay.

forty-eight hours. One winter's day Walmsley left Hondeklip and ran into a north-west gale which hammered the west coast for days. Six days passed and the *Louise* had not made port. Experienced seamen thought she had foundered. Fourteen days after leaving Hondeklip, however, the battered *Louise* appeared in St. Helena Bay. Her engine had broken down, but Walmsley was in his element as he made sail and rode out the gale. Once again he owed his life to his seamanship.

His next command was more to his taste, the fine Grand Banks schooner *Protea*, a two-hundred-tonner built in Nova Scotia. She was a creature of beauty but Walmsley drove her too hard and sailed her to pieces. He never considered his owner's pocket when he heard the wind in the rigging.

Walmsley blew too many sails out of the *Protea*, and in the end she opened up like an old bag. The shapely *Protea*, which had been to Walvis for snoek and the Southern Ocean for seals, was sold by auction for thirty shillings.

After the *Protea* Walmsley went into steam for the first time in his life. A French steamer *Lozere* was lost on Kerguelen and the little wartime "mystery ship" *Kildalkey* was sent down south to rescue the crew. Walmsley signed on as mate. It was a desperate voyage for the double ended steamer took huge seas on board and the chief engineer was killed while closing a skylight. But they reached Kerguelen in time to save the castaways from freezing to death and brought them all to Table Bay. For Walmsley it was only another page in

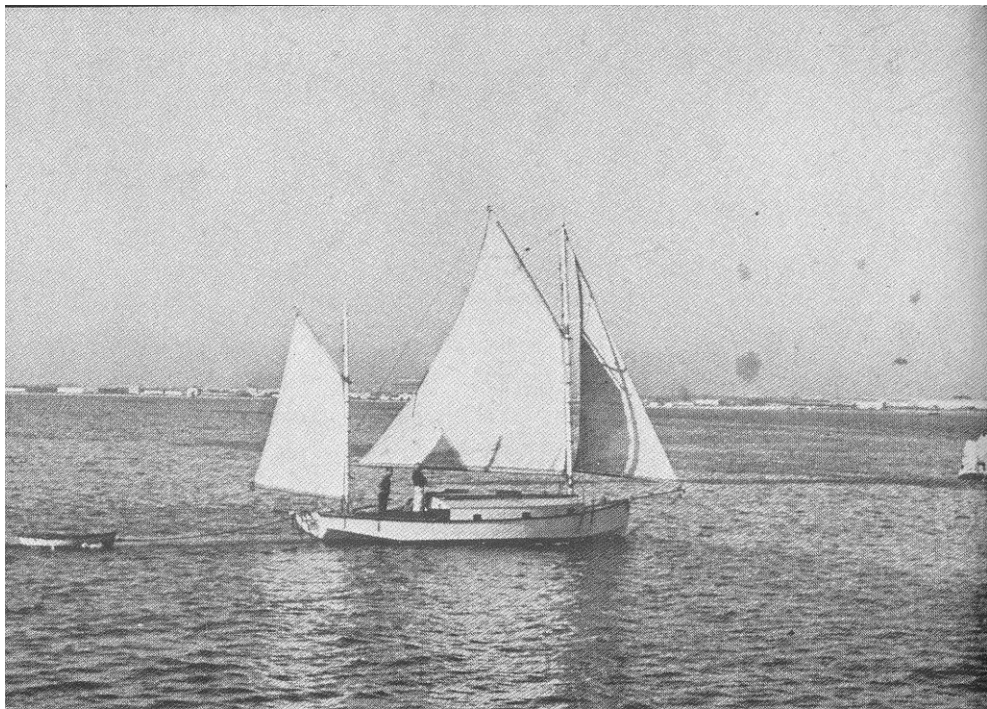
a life lived close to death. Walmsley went back to sail in the cranky old four-masted barquentine *Sound of Jura*. True, she had an auxiliary engine but it gave her only two or three knots in calm weather. She was a notorious roller and Walmsley must have longed for the *Birkdale* when the slow *Sound of Jura* rolled down to the “roaring forties” with her cargoes of coal for the Kerguelen whaling and sealing station. When the *Sound of Jura* was laid up at Hoedjies Bay in 1929, Walmsley remained with her as ship-keeper. That was the last episode in his life of adventure. He married for the third time and lived with his wife and their curly haired son on board the hulk. By a coincidence, the *Oberon* lay close by. She was the sister ship to the *Sound of Jura* and after nearly half a century on the oceans of the world

the two ships had come together again in this quiet anchorage.

Frank found that Walmsley had turned the *Sound of Jura* into a floating farmyard. He milked his cows every day, looked after his sheep and hens, and thought of the old days in the *Birkdale*. Yes, he had great wealth of memory, that old ship keeper, ending his career with the barquentine swinging to her anchor near the point where the treasure ship *Middelburg* went down.

Frank Wightman lay at Hoedjies Bay in the northern arm of Saldanha for a year.¹¹ War came and Frank volunteered, knowing full well that his chances at the age of forty-four were even more remote than they had been

¹¹ See appendix: Hoedjies Bay.



At the end of exactly twelve months the yacht was launched ... Frank named the yacht *Wylo* after the sailing ship in one of Longfellow's poems." (Photo: John R. Hagens.)

at the outbreak of World War I. Rejected again and worried by the naval activity which had come to slumbering Saldanha, the harassed Frank Wightman heard of the quiet lagoon. "I found that I was spending less than three pounds a month on food in those days," Frank recalled. "So I had no money problems. At that rate my savings would last for years and I would have enough for my cruise when the time came. But I knew that I still had to learn to live with myself."

For three years Frank Wightman lived on board *Wyllo* in that peaceful corner of the lagoon. He was hardly aware of the war for he rarely set eyes on a newspaper. Seaplanes and other aircraft might pass overhead but he knew nothing of their missions and

was only vaguely aware of the submarine warfare along the coasts of South Africa not very far from his hiding-place. He was not wanted, so he could only wait hopefully for the end.

Then a naval officer at Saldanha told Frank that the demand for recruits had become urgent; if he went to the Castle in Cape Town again for medical examination he would probably be accepted. Frank marched in hopefully but he was turned down again because of a small inguinal hernia. But now Frank had seen a chance. The medical officer had not mentioned his age or his height and it seemed that he might be accepted after an operation. Frank went to a friendly surgeon, entered the Rondebosch Cottage Hospital and had the operation. He was accepted as an able

seaman; a far more able seaman than most of the South African Navy recruits of that period. His papers gave his age as thirty-seven. Frank was greatly assisted in this familiar wartime deception by the fact of his birth in the old Transvaal Republic, where it was unnecessary to register births and deaths. Some people solved the problem by showing baptismal certificates; others were "assessed". Frank, with his splendid physique (apart from the hernia scar) had no difficulty in knocking nine years off his age.

Able Seaman Frank Wightman put on his cap and jumper and bellbottoms with a wry smile, wondering where this nautical rig would lead him. They showed him how to lash up a hammock and lectured him on such technique as time by the ship's bell,

port and starboard and traditions he had known before he left school. "I was also taught how to handle a six-inch gun," Frank remarked. "After that I never fired so much as a pea-shooter." He was anxious to serve afloat (unlike many "depot rats" who had gone through the course with him) and he had been assured that he would soon be sent to the Mediterranean theatre of war. When the course ended Frank was posted to the signal station on Signal Hill (overlooking Table Bay) to learn Morse. He startled his instructors with his skill as a telegraphist; indeed there were few who could match the old cable operator's speed and accuracy. When it became necessary to paint a high wireless mast Frank was the only volunteer for the dizzy job. He swung there for three hours in a bo'sun's

chair in a hard south-easter, working feverishly. When he came down he felt an itching pain and discovered that the hernia had broken out again. Frank the stoic said nothing about it. He never wore a truss. For the next five years he lived with the hernia, pushing it back when it protruded.

Frank Wightman's high marks in the signalling examinations were noted by a senior officer and he was sent on an officer's course. Again he passed with honours and was posted to Robben Island for a course in electronics.¹² His friend Llewellyn Thomas was afloat in command of a minesweeper and Frank longed for the sea life; but in wartime reasonable ambitions are often unattainable and Frank found himself careering round the Robben Island

roads at midnight inspecting the sentries and making sure that the women ratings were not being molested.

Durban was Sub-Lieutenant Wightman's next station and there he joined the staff defending the harbour with various secret devices. For a time he was on duty at Umhlanga, twelve miles up the coast. The commanding officer often assigned Frank to the task of escorting the girls to the swimming beach. (Let us be charitable and say he knew Frank was a powerful swimmer.) One evening Frank was leading the way through the sub-tropical bush when he heard a cry of terror; a girl had been bitten on the cheek by a mamba.¹³ Frank saw the fang marks. He rolled a handkerchief

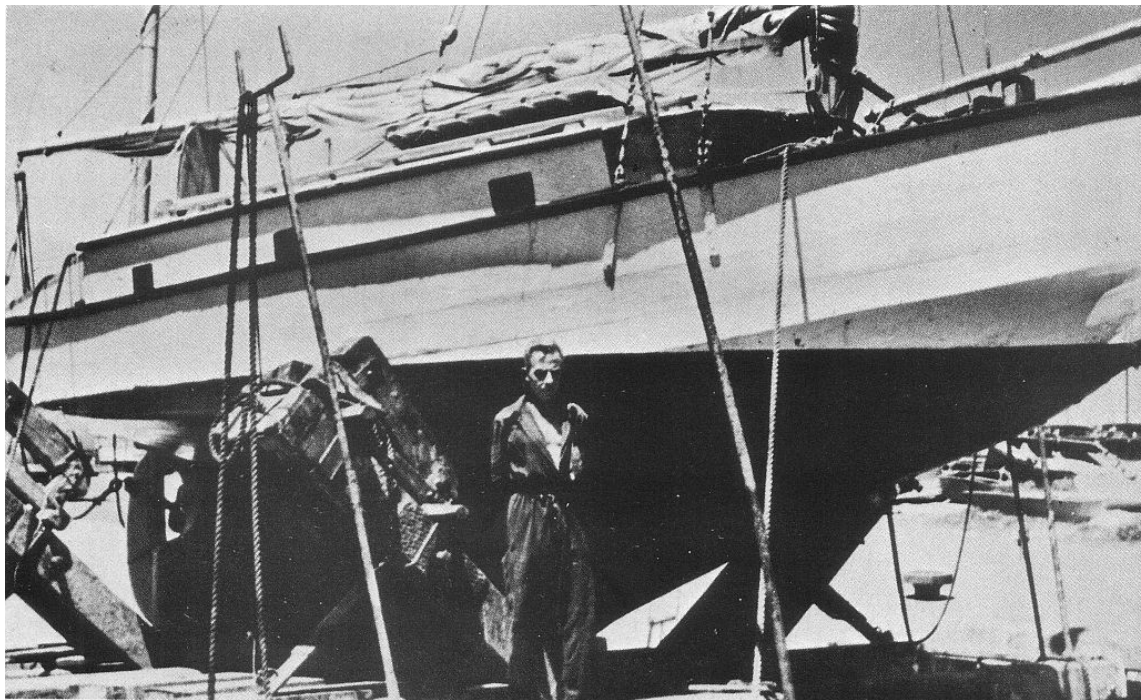
¹² See appendix: Robben Island.

¹³ See appendix: Mamba.

tightly to form a “grommet” tourniquet and pressed it to the girl’s face; then he lanced the poison site with a sheath knife. The girl screamed and collapsed. Frank’s courageous effort at first aid had failed. He rushed the girl to the medical officer, pressing the tourniquet firmly, but the injection of serum failed and within twenty minutes the girl was dead. Frank was exonerated.

Twice during this period Frank was called upon to fly in Anson aircraft on coastal patrol. He disliked the noise of the engines and was glad to return to earth. Those were the only flights he made in his life. He was also ordered to take part in a short submarine cruise from Durban. “I hated every minute of it, especially when submerged,” Frank told me.

The war ended while Frank was at Durban. Among the demobilisation benefits was the offer of free surgery if required; but Frank still ignored the hernia. His mind was now concentrated on one aim - return to *Wylo*. He filled in the forms for urgent release and under the heading occupation he wrote “private means”. This was not entirely untrue. He had saved hundreds of pounds out of his sub-lieutenants’ pay and he had no intention of allowing the authorities to find a job for him. So he returned to *Wylo* a few months after the war ended. He found her safe in the new yacht basin at Table Bay Docks, well cared for by the Royal Cape Yacht Club during his absence. Happily he sailed back to Saldanha and the lagoon.



Frank Wightman beside *Wylo* on the Royal Cape Yacht Club slipway.

CHAPTER 7

OPEN SEA

*“We are all escapists, whether we like it or not.
Man has always been dissatisfied with his condition.”*

JAMES LAVER.

“IN my life there has been only one great and intimate experience - the open sea,” Frank Wightman said to me again and again. “The open sea has never disappointed me. If I had my life over again I would sail round the world in my own boat.”

Frank sailed away from the Cape on January 17, 1947 with the intention of sailing round the world. I have his logbook before me, written up every day by his shipmate Graham Young;¹⁴

but I have no intention of repeating the story told by Frank Wightman in “The Wind is Free”. This is the story that was never published, told to me by Frank long afterwards. I recommend his splendid book to all those who are interested in man’s struggle with the sea. For those who have not yet read it I shall give a brief summary of events in addition to Frank’s later comments.

Although Wylo left the Cape in midsummer she ran into heavy weather almost immediately. The ship was often hove to in confused seas. Navigation was by dead reckoning as the sky was clouded over. “Rain depressed us more than anything yet,” Graham Young wrote. “Both feel sore externally and internally and utterly weary.” Moreover the ship leaked, five buckets in twelve hours. At one period Frank thought the hull had been

¹⁴ See appendix: Young, Graham.

strained in the gale. Frank had to stand long watches at that period as Young was unused to going without rest. "He was willing, he made a gallant effort but in the wild weather he was often half asleep," Frank told me. "Once he toppled over and laid his whole eyebrow, open on the tiller stock."

They ran before the great seas under foresail only, making about eighty miles a day. For nine days Frank was unable to take sights. "I made up my mind that we would never sight St. Helena but I did not tell my shipmate," Frank confided. By the end of January they were in the trade winds, running under double spinnakers, the leak no longer worrying them. Frank navigated with a little box sextant which a naval officer had described as a toy; and he had an English deck watch he had bought for a guinea at a

naval sale in Simonstown. "We made our landfalls with those instruments, and some were very difficult," said Frank, "When I sighted St. Helena just where I thought it should be I could hardly believe it. After that I did not worry so much."

St. Helena gave them their first rest after three weeks at sea. They spent seven weeks there and Frank thought he would like to settle on the island after sailing round the world. "I loved those weird, neglected country houses, speaking plainly of opulence in the old days," Frank said. "In the gardens there were fruit trees that had gone back to the primitive, yielding apples the size of acorns. I found a calash in a coach house, a light hooded carriage once drawn by a high-stepping horse. I imagined myself in a tiny cottage, growing my own vegetables, baking

my own bread, keeping a cow, wandering over that island where the scenery is shattering in its beauty. My cottage would be on the heights. After walking all day I would come home in the evening, build a fire of twigs and eat something simple. Only on market days would I go down to Jamestown to buy my few groceries. The island is so English; so lacking in the emotional violence's I detest. On those heights beneath the arching clouds I would wander my life away. In my garden there would be six fowls and a beehive, and the milk I did not drink I would churn into butter or cheese. I would watch the wild life and stand on those high peaks and look out to sea. The nights would hold the stillness of the highlands. I would grow old and be at peace."

When they sailed on to Ascension they rigged an awning over the cockpit. Both men spent hours bathing in the wake, holding on to a rope. After eleven days of fine sailing they closed in with Ascension. The cable staff welcomed Frank as an old cable man and he gave them a demonstration of his skill with long-disused instruments. Late in April *Wylo* steered for South America and covered the twelve hundred miles in a fortnight. (Their landfall at Fortaleza brought Frank to a Brazilian port he had known in his cable days.) After leaving Fortaleza for Trinidad there occurred a misfortune which influenced the whole course of the adventure. Far out at sea off the mouth of the Amazon they saw in the darkness a line of breakers caused by the river current; and there a huge sea carried *Wylo* on

to a tree trunk. She lay with her bilge on the tree for ninety minutes while the two men struggled to free their ship. Frank went over the side and stood on the trunk but could not push it away. In the end they worked *Wylo* along the trunk and cleared her; but by this time she was leaking badly. They made Georgetown in British Guiana safely and went on to Trinidad. Graham Young said good-bye to Frank there for he had opportunities open to him in New York and he could not go on cruising. Frank wrote to Llewellyn Thomas in June 1947 from Trinidad: "Don't laugh when I say that I am giving up. *Wylo* has leaked from the time she was battered off the Cape. The leak becomes alarming whenever she has to carry fore and aft sail in any weight of wind. She hit a tree trunk off the Amazon when travelling fast on a

very dark night. For the next three days it was more baling than sailing. I am coming back to Cape Town. Her unseaworthiness has made the trip very exhausting and, for me, rather frightening. A leaking ship that cannot carry sail is an uncomfortable thing to be in when there are hundreds of miles of snarling sea between you and the nearest beach." So Frank returned to Cape Town late in 1947, by steamer, having sold *Wylo* in Trinidad.

It was during the unhappy period that followed that I encouraged Frank to write "The Wind is Free". Some said that I wrote it for him but this was untrue. I mapped out the chapters and suggested headings. Graham Young supplied the brilliant title of the book. I read the manuscript and after a certain amount of sub-editing I took it to my own publisher. He accepted it

immediately. Before long “The Wind is Free” was a best-seller in South Africa and the United States, and the “Mariner’s Library” edition sold well in Britain and elsewhere for years.

Nevertheless, the critical Frank Wightman was far from satisfied with his book. Years afterwards I began to realise how much he had left out and only now am I able to fill in some of the gaps in the story. “I just wrote a boy’s escapist yarn,” Frank confessed. “At sea I realised that I was being saturated with something inexpressible and eternal, something I could never do justice to in print. I tried in the book to put my shipmate and my ship on the map but the task was beyond me. If I had had the guts to go on round the world I might have written something. The leak worried me, of course, and I did not like the idea of

putting all the immense machinery of Panama to work for a little thing like *Wylo*. But I should have done it. Man’s crowning evil is infirmity of purpose. Probably I should have been swallowed up by the sea and there would have been no old age for me. But I should have gone on. God, Laurie, when you’re right out in mid-ocean with those marching swells, the ship rising and nothing but blue water all round you - that is enchantment. You see the clouds moving against the stars and the mystery grips you. It was marvellous in the trades. I could stay on deck naked all night. I could not bring myself to go below with all that beauty on deck - I just curled up in the cockpit and went to sleep. It’s a bloody fine life. But my shipmate was never claimed by the sea. Graham Young was always honest. ‘I hate

this', he said. The moods of the elements can make you suffer but I loved it." Throughout the ocean crossing in *Wylo* Frank worried far more about his shipmate than the weather or the leak. "My trouble with my shipmate was to keep him in the ship," Frank recalled. "He knew nothing of sailing and he was six feet four. When he stood on deck he looked as tall as the mizzen. Every day I heard the thump, thump, thump as Graham moved about the cabin hitting his head on the coach roof. I shall go alone next time. When I go below, when I heave to, there will be no one to fall overboard. The decks will be empty. On the cruise I used to go below dead with sleep - and then I would wake in a nightmare and look out to see whether Graham was still there. Graham had courage but he was

no seaman. He did not know enough to avoid falling over the side. By God he did not. He used to stand up on that deck holding on to the mizzen shrouds and he had no sense of balance. I told him to lie down in the cockpit but I never knew what he was doing. Graham nearly broke my heart because he was so willing and so unfit for the violent motion. He learnt a lot but he never learnt caution. I was twenty-two years older than Graham and I was so anxious. I was haunted by the fear of sending a cable to his parents: 'Have lost Graham at sea'. I was happy when he left me."

I asked Frank what qualities the lone sailor needed. Was it the right physique? He said that physique did not matter unless you were decrepit. No, it was the desire to go that counted. The impact of the sea was

subtle. Seamanship was really intention and that was something far above intelligence.

“What about courage?” Frank said courage was useful when you were menaced by another man. When you were threatened by something as immense as the sea the will to survive was more important. You had to shut your mind to danger, resign yourself to hardship. If you looked at the danger your courage would collapse. “Be agile and watch every step,” Frank warned. “Do the best you can. Show your endurance. Serve the ship you love and you will come through. Then totter down into the cabin, spread the mattress on the deck and sleep and sleep and sleep. The ship will look after herself under bare poles. When you wake up you are cured.”

Frank did not believe in elaborate self-steering devices such as Chichester used during his lone voyage round the world. Sheets running through blocks on the quarters were better, he thought; reliable blocks and good rope, nothing to go wrong. He never lay in his bunk for long in heavy weather. He pitted his wits against wind and sea and aided the nimble boat. Only in fine and moderate weather did he make up for lost sleep. “When only the sailing ship was seen on the oceans of the world she carried enough men to handle her round the clock through all hazards of the sea,” declared Frank. “She was never left unattended. She was complex, sensitive and vulnerable. Slocum, the first of the single-handers, was a sailor of the sail and he paid due tribute to the *Spray* by always remaining on

deck when the weather taxed her. As he had to sleep some time he did it when the weather was mild.”

In dangerous weather, by day or by night, Frank steered facing aft. No matter what the compass course might be, he faced aft so that he could throw her stern round to take threatening seas right on her stern, where the boat offered least resistance to their impact. In daylight his eyes told him what to do. At night he acted according to a mysterious sense of balance. Since even the stern offered some resistance it was essential for the helmsman to help the boat forward in the direction in which she offered the least resistance to movement; forward in the line of the hull. Frank said his aim was to avoid giving the sea something to overwhelm. If she was driven right over until the lee deck was deeply

submerged the deck would act as a keel; her real keel being then on or near the surface. Then she would go over. Once her masts and sail were under water they, too, would act as keels to turn the boat over, before they carried away. So the man who depended on self steering gear would also need luck and good weather or he would never be heard of again. Some yachts rise on a big sea and then start running off the helm and tearing at the rudder. Frank said that *Wylo* never did that; she went shuddering down the sea and he never had to touch the helm.

The mizzen *Wylo* carried was a considerable sail of soft, grey, silken Irish flax. She handled well under foresail and mizzen even in light breezes. And many times out on the deep waters the mizzen kept her head

to sea while Frank and his shipmate slept below.

I persuaded Frank to talk about navigation for I knew he had his own way of explaining that vast subject. He talked as though to a child, for which I was duly thankful. "You have to keep pointing in the right direction and fix your position on a featureless watery curve," Frank began. "A little knowledge of the stars is useful until they are obscured; but on clear nights in heavy weather the stars are more reliable than a swinging compass. The run of the seas and the angle of the wind, taken together, are very reliable; and if the wind veers the confusion is apparent at once. You have the 'Nautical Almanac' giving the sun's declination - that is to say, the sun's position at every hour in every latitude. Since the sun's position is

known your measured distance from it (obtained with the sextant) is the measured distance from a known spot in latitude and longitude. By relating the unknown (in figures) to the known you convert the unknown into the known. In navigation it is mildly complicated because, owing to the wobbling of the earth on its axis of spin, the sun's position in relation to the equator is not constant; but it can always be discovered by interpolation from tables. Those are the mechanics of the meridian altitude at sea, the simplest calculation in navigation. I had a wireless set but I could have done without. After all, old Slocum only had his alarm clock. My navigation was purely academic when we set out but after picking up that little crumb called St. Helena I knew that my landfalls would be all right.

After that I laughed at navigation problems.”

Frank Wightman passed more than a year in Cape Town after selling *Wylo*, living with his old friend Llewellyn Thomas and his wife Ina and writing his book. He secured rather strange employment at first; flying kites holding up a streamer bearing a cigarette advertisement. Later he mended fishing rods in a little backroom for a sports firm. Once the royalties began to arrive Frank gave up these odd jobs and depended entirely on his earnings as a writer.

He was a splendid pupil at first, grasping difficult points of technique immediately. Later he became impossible. He wanted to teach himself to write as he had learnt sailing, by his own efforts; and there were

times when his errors due to inexperience led to failure in the market place. However, the writing occupied his mind at a time when he was suffering heavily from regrets about his chequered world cruise. It also gave him something more than a living. Frank was saving money again. When he had saved enough he wrote to the buyer of *Wylo*, a wealthy Trinidad resident known as “Tookie” Collens. Frank wanted his boat back. The generous “Tookie” gave it to him as a present with a useful marine engine installed. I saw Frank off in a freighter bound for Port of Spain and wondered when I would see him again.

Frank was away for about two years. He sailed up the chain of the West Indies: Grenada, St. Vincent, St. Lucia, Martinique, Dominica, Nevis,

St. Kitts, the Bahamas and then along the inland waterway from Miami to Baltimore. Once more I shall only give impressions and experiences which Frank left out of his second book, “*Wylo Sails Again*”.

When he left Trinidad he was handicapped by the loss of the set of flax sails he had made for *Wylo*. “Tookie” had used the incomparable mainsail as a cover for a lorry. The mainsail Frank found on board nearly made him weep. He said it had been designed by someone whose trade was sewing shop blinds. There were no “tablings” at clew, tack, throat and peak and no cringles worked into the sail at all those places. It was made of canvas that looked like hessian. When he was half way to Grenada the whole sail had pulled out of shape. Frank took the sail on shore at Grenada and

spent two days working on it on the beach. He sailed all the way to Baltimore with that wretched sail (when he was not under power) but he often lowered it in shame in the presence of well-equipped yachts. A new suit of sails would have been beyond his means; the canvas alone worked out at more than three hundred dollars; more than half the total amount *Wylo* had cost. He was so poor at the time, he told me, that his funds would have filled a matchbox. He shopped in the negro markets and fell in love with their din and stench. “Those markets are like Hogarth’s world,” Frank said. “It is life. Raw and pulsing. Not wearing a little city hat and being a gent.”

Of all the isles he saw, Frank was most deeply impressed by the Bahamas. He often spoke of settling on one of the

uninhabited cays of the Great Exuma group and making a complete escape from civilisation. “From Nassau I would steer south and east through the cays, close-hauled over shoals where the ‘bank blink’ is so green that the undersides of the very wings of the gulls are green,” Frank declared. “Like an early devotional picture the distant days are seen through up-thrust rays of green. You come upon them softly and look inland at scatters of shell-white cottages, cattle browsing, a lovely donkey on a beach, palms leaning in the wind. Beneath the tireless keel there is another world of streaking sands and coral and fantastic fish. A smothered world that moves as we do in dreams, with dragging languor.”



Frank Wightman on the deck of *Wyllo* in January 1950, when he returned from the United States by steamer with his yacht.
(Photo: Die Burger.)

Frank said that cays were granted on a ninety-nine year lease at absurdly low rentals. He would build a double-rondavel of hard coral and roof it with palm fronds and repair the “pirate’s well” where the water was so sweet. After enriching the soil with guano he would grow his own fruit and vegetables. He would fish and live in tranquillity under the sky to the rise and fall of the unhurried tides, away from wars and rumours of wars.

Frank tied up alongside a large American yacht at Nassau in the Bahamas. The yacht had come from Miami, a very short passage, but the yachtsmen called it “going foreign”. One of the Americans looked down at Frank and called: “Where you from, skipper?”

“Cape Town, South Africa.”

The American shouted to his ship-mates: “Here’s a guy sailed all the way from Africa - make’s our cruise look like peanuts.”

Frank had intended sailing on to New York for the launching of the American edition of “The Wind is Free”. However the thoughtful Graham Young felt that Frank should not go back to the Cape alone in *Wylo*. He secured a free passage from Baltimore for Frank and *Wylo* on board a South African freighter. Frank returned to Cape Town in January 1950 and a few days later *Wylo* was back in Kraal Bay. A long chance, I told him, but *Wylo* had come home to her lagoon. Frank was to remain there (apart from visits to Cape Town for slipping) for the next fifteen years. With a sigh of relief the giant had gone back into hiding. There in the

peace of the lagoon he wrote his second book, published in London as “*Wylø Sails Again*”. It was a poor effort in comparison with “The Wind is Free” and Frank knew it.

CHAPTER 8

THE LAGOON YEAR

Solitude is the audience-chamber of God.

ANNE C. LYNCH

HOW DO the days and the years pass in the calm solitude of the lagoon after the drama and the anger of the sea? Frank Wightman declared that every hour was filled with rowing, swimming or walking; housekeeping or the care of his floating home; reading and writing; above all he was lost in wonder at the ever-changing beauty of his surroundings.

He had canvas and timber for building an Eskimo *kayak*, a sixteen foot decked canoe with a man-hole amidships and a double-bladed paddle. This was his first task after he had dropped a new mooring in Kraal Bay. Some men would have had difficulty in

handling the narrow *kayak*; but Frank, with his genius for technique, soon became expert as an Eskimo. He found that he could load the *kayak* with jars of fresh water, bags of groceries and still paddle back to *Wyllo* without sinking. Frank had one flaw in his exquisite health; he was a poor sleeper and he often stayed up until midnight to shorten the hours of darkness. One sleepless night, a still night under a full moon, he slid into the *kayak* and headed for the Saldanha Bay entrance. On and on he paddled, entranced by the silver that shone unbroken on the silent water. He passed out of the great bay and even in the open sea there was not a ripple. Southwards went the man in the *kayak* impelled by a sudden desire to land on the bird island that lay ahead; Vondeling Island, an island inhabited only for a few months every

year while the guano was collected. Frank knew it was a deserted island at that time. He reached the sandy beach and hauled up the *kayak* clear of the tide. For an hour he roamed among the wild pigeons and cormorants and the burrows of the penguins. Over on the mainland Constable Hill loomed up in the moonlight and he pictured little Wylo waiting for him in the bay just below the hill. It was long after sunrise when he came back to the yacht, and then he slept. His days and nights were his own, he ate when he was hungry, and there was no routine to imprison him.

All the lagoon villages had wells and sweet water but it was a long way for Frank in the *kayak*. He guessed there must be water on the shores of Kraal Bay or the Hottentots of old would not have made their kraal there. So he dug

near the beach, went down seven feet and struck clean pure water without a trace of salt. It solved his problem for a time. Then a herd of cows were turned loose in that part of the veld and they spoilt Frank's well.

Once during that spring he took his sleeping bag on shore and slept on the peak of Constable Hill. Twice he walked far down Sixteen Mile Beach and spent the nights among the wild flowers. Always he woke before the sky lightened, hair wet with dew. Beneath the sleeping bag his body had moulded the earth. He lay there, listening to the interrogative sleepy cries of the waking birds, and he felt as though he was still in his teens. Then the veld became ruddy, the cheeping's of the birds rose in confidence; the world flamed with the diamond-hard light of Africa and the

birds shrilled in ecstasy. He moved his naked body out of the bag, like a re-birth, and walked naked down the empty beach to the sea. “Surely the young should have this gift,” he often said to me. “It is so precious, almost wasted on a man of my years. If the young, misled by their leaders, only knew the truth, then they would throw them out and return to this real world.”

Frank was still spending only about three pounds a month on food. Cheese he regarded as a luxury and he ate his cheddar sparingly. He had a garlic crusher, and often he spread a slice of home-made bread with mutton fat and flavoured it with garlic. Fishing was never among Frank’s daily occupations but now and again he would drop a line over the side and bring up one or

two harders.¹⁵ He hated killing but he brought his large sheath knife down quickly and the heads flew into the lagoon. Once a month, perhaps, Frank made a luxurious and elaborate rice pudding. He grudged the time and the trouble but he went through the long ritual to secure the perfect result. One pound of rice had to soak for twenty-four hours. Then he boiled it for fifteen minutes over a high flame, standing over the pot and stirring. Beside the stove he had half a pint of cream ready, dates cut up, grated nuts, two tablespoons of spring flower honey, a teaspoon of powdered Jamaica ginger, six drops of almond flavouring, three fresh eggs whipped up in farm milk. When he tipped the rice out of the pot every grain was dry

¹⁵ See appendix: Harders.

and separate from the rest. He mixed all the ingredients and lived on it while it lasted. "Food is a bore," Frank often declared; but a man willing to prepare such food must have had a secret longing for a fine dish.

"I have dominated my body for so long that it will never rule me," Frank boasted to me. "Yet I am almost a slave to coffee. I know just when to drop the grains of salt into the turmoil of boiling coffee. I know just how long the coffee must stand when I have taken it off the stove, before it is poured. I learnt all the tricks from the proprietor of a wee *lecheria* in Montevideo where I went every night before going on duty. He was a Sicilian. His coffee was touched lightly with nutmeg and it made a good drink for a young mouth. Later I learnt to appreciate the more austere taste of Brazil-

iano coffee, faintly-scorched, with a charcoal-chocolate nuance you can never forget."

True coffee drinkers, said Frank, all boil their coffee in a pot or iron kettle. Some drop the grains in when the water is just warming, others when it is boiling vigorously. Then it is left standing in the pot until the grounds have precipitated. It is poured off gently so as not to disturb the settled grains. The bouquet is determined by the length of time the coffee is left standing. Some hurry the settling of the grains by dropping a teaspoon of cold water in the pot and this sends the grains to the bottom like lead pellets. Frank let the grains take their own time; it was his way of avoiding a harsh flavour. In his lonely travels over the face of South America he watched the coffee-brewing process

hundreds of times. Never did he see a machine. He brought the art of coffee making to the lagoon and practised it like an accomplished violinist.

The man who was bored by food also loved baking whole-meal loaves according to the Pidgeon recipe. He made two-pound loaves of nutty-tasting unsifted boermeel and breathed in the generous aroma that filled the little cabin.¹⁶ But he was sincere in his contempt for the luxuries of civilisation. He once described caviar as “ball-bearings” and remarked that button mushrooms were well-named because one might as well chew the buttons from the boots of Jane Austen characters. He looked at these things in shop-windows and thought of his vegetable stews, his bag of wheat. “I

have left my fellows on a distant trail far behind me,” he remarked. “My palate has become so primitive over the years that the elaborate and exacting taste-buds developed in the cities have atrophied. I don’t know that it worries me. I would rather have a four penny cabbage from the farm than a plate of smoked salmon.”

The farm he visited was a well-watered small-holding at Oesterval on the eastern shore of the lagoon two miles from his anchorage.¹⁷ When he expected parcels, books or any heavy food supplies he rowed across in the dinghy with its storage space instead of using the faster *kayak*. There were days in snoring northerlies and streaking rain when the trip to Oesterval and back took him four

¹⁶ See appendix: Boermeel.

¹⁷ See appendix: Oesterval.

hours. As a rule he picked his weather and revelled in the crossing. After a sleepless night he would set out very early, at four-thirty in the jet night under a glory of stars. The stem of the dinghy and the oars flashed into phosphorescent fire and it would be utterly still apart from the sucking of the oar-blades. Far off he would discern the loom of the land. Often he rowed standing, facing the bows. He might see a faint light flashing beneath the hills; probably someone carrying a lantern along the beach, the light waxing and waning as though it was swinging from side to side. In the darkness it would be the only gleam apart from the glowing passage of the dinghy. Once a black wall loomed ahead and he backed his oars; it was a fishing boat with men rowing, gliding slowly across his bows. When he

reached the beach at Oesterval he dropped the dinghy's grapnel and waded on shore. He put a towel round his bare shoulders, ran a comb through his dew-soaked hair and set off for the house with his milk-can.

A tap at the back door and a seemly wait while the farmer's wife preened herself for a visitor. Ducks and geese brushed Frank's ankles, cows rumbled and stamped. Then a door opened and the soft lamp-light flooded out to the animals. "Morning, Missur Warpmunk." (The lagoon people seemed to have difficulty with the simple name of Wightman, and Frank was always Missur Warpmunk!) Frank stepped into the farm kitchen, filled with the milk churn and bottles for morning delivery, a vast basket of eggs, a sick hen in a blanket, a tumble of pots and

pans, shelves covered with farm preserves.

“Ekks, Missur Warpmunk?”

“A dozen please.”

As she put them in a bag her eyes fell on Frank and she questioned him.

“You bin swimmin’, hey?”

“Not now.”

A pause while the eggs were counted and she went on: “Your hair so wet, hey?”

“Dew, that’s all.”

She screwed up the mouth of the bag, her eyes still on Frank’s head. “One day you catch a cole!”

After that, the sun topping the skyline, Frank sometimes walked along the cliff, looking down at the swiftly-

flowing currents, to Langebaan. The village would be waking as he arrived, the air laden with the heavy nostalgic scent of dew-drenched bush. Marra, the storekeeper he favoured, opened early. He did not have to wait for post office hours as his letters were collected by the farmer’s wife and handed to him on the farm. He could saunter back to the dinghy, put his groceries on board and pull back to Kraal Bay under the sun. Frank bought a dozen eggs at a time, not through a fondness for eggs but because the farmer’s wife was poor and was pleased to sell them. Often he had to remind himself of the eggs and then he would make a large omelette. Frank was always a welcome visitor at the farm. “You pay me on the doorstep,” the farmer’s wife would say. “You’re

an old customer. Those people in the village keep me waiting.”

Those were the years when the lagoon entered Frank’s soul. Once he said to me: “I sometimes worry about people finding out how lucky I am. It seems unfair that I should have this sort of life when they are having theirs. It is odd to hear people asking me whether I am lonely. I am lonely only in a crowd. It is my belief that no man can know another since we are all encased or imprisoned in the shell of our own consciousness. We meet like distant figures signalling to each other across a crevasse. What is called intimacy is a term we use to comfort ourselves.”

Frank was a great walker during the early years and for long afterwards. The exercise meant something but the inner appeal was Nature revealing all her flaws and grandeur. On each long

trek across the veld he encountered the myriad small lives that scuttle, freeze and stare, or feign death as a stranger passes. In the fields of wheat the pheasants uttered shrill cries, racing over the earth from stook to stook. There was no regular pattern in Frank’s life except getting up and going to bed. He was living among the elements so that plans had to be changed according to the weather without the slightest emotional response. “City routine, with the utter dependability of everything, draws the colour out of life,” Frank once told me. “The din made by man in order to live in a city is monstrous. Personal quirks in crowded surroundings are unbearable. In the lagoon country nature’s quirks are so vast and impersonal that one learns to shrug. If you did not learn you would soon

become mental. But when you have learnt to live with nature then you realise suddenly one day that you have learnt how to live.”

Frank declared that he experienced solitude only when he was among uncongenial people. Two people out of harmony with one another would come to understand the meaning of loneliness in a way a man living alone would never know.

Spring is always the finest season on the lagoon. In a good year the wild flowers blaze everywhere triumphantly. Seabirds cried while the clouds moved over *Wylo* and the growl of the surf drifted across the peninsula. Dawn found Frank in the water; the setting sun would cast a ray through a porthole to pass over the paper in Frank’s clattering typewriter. Each day the moon pulled the tides and the sun

rose and set and the winds made ripples round the hull. Frank woke and worked on his ship, slept and dreamed.

Spring on the lagoon ... a light north west air drifting over the warm earth, the first dews of evening settling on the land. A narrow field sown with wheat as green as the wings of a dragon-fly. On the rocks at the northern end of Kraal Bay there is a skein of flamingos and their strange voices come over the water. Quark - quark - honk. Odd voices for such lovely birds. An under-ceiling of wet clouds drives swiftly to the south under a high-flung blaze of colour, cirrus and alto-cumulus still burning in a sun that has set on the lagoon. Far away a whaler drones on her siren as she comes round the point, warning the station hands to man the steam-winch and haul the catch up the

slipway. Near *Wylo* a little herd boy calls shrilly to his fat dawdling cows; like a tiny brown stick insect he hurries this way and that, brandishing a switch that he strikes furiously on the ground; but the herd still moves slowly. I shared that evening on the lagoon and Frank with a smile remarked: “What a healing life is mine.”

Yes, the lagoon in spring is a world at peace where the season brings dearth or riches. The stars score the night sky with lines of light. The moon swings round the earth, dragging the tides that flush the lonely beaches. *Wylo* rises and falls through the years. And the man on board *Wylo* lives with his memories. It is fulfilment. Round the yacht plunge the terns, emerging with writhing silver food in their cruel beaks. Avocets sound their lovely

call.¹⁸ There is a murmur of waters round the hull and the eternal mutter of the ocean surf. Frank clung to this life. It was a life filled with strange experiences but not the clash of warring human temperaments, jagged and savage. Spring on the lagoon. Green, green, green. He was drawn again and again to the summit of Constable Hill. There he shed his velskoene and clothes; he spent day after day looking out over his world.¹⁹ The hill was only six hundred feet high but on the flat veld it was like a mountain. At sunset in the spring it is often still on the lagoon. Then one day the air is thick, almost misted, with flying ants. They have chosen that day of the year to make their short

¹⁸ See appendix: Avocets.

¹⁹ See appendix: Velskoene.

mysterious flight on the frail wings of pantomime fairies. Seabirds drift round like a snowstorm feeding on honey-coloured insects.

Vleis appear on the veld. Through the perfume of the spring flowers comes the aroma of refuse burning two miles away across the water. You can hear the dogs barking over there, too, but their noises are muted. In the distance the wheat looks like green velvet, poppies glowing hotly in the heart of it. Constable Hill is a riot of colour, blue iris growing thickly on the flanks like English bluebells. One year there was a short but soaking winter, over twenty inches of rain in two months. That brought the most arresting show of spring flowers for decades. Frank said that when the sun fell at a certain angle the colours reminded him of

Broadway neon lights, but without the vulgarity.

Summer became Frank's enemy. Not the first year or the second; but he reached a period when he realised that the south-east wind would roar along the beaches day after day for months like a sand blast. When the wind dropped it was often too hot to stand on deck. Frank had a pair of Dutch wooden clogs someone had given him for no known reason and he wore them when he had work to do outside the cabin. Sometimes the heat was really distressing and he fell into the water and hung on to his dinghy like a piece of kelp. Once a berg wind brought the temperature up to ninety-two degrees in Kraal Bay; but this was a weather freak. Then a fog came in from the west and the thermometer dropped twelve degrees in a few minutes.

On still summer nights Frank slept on deck with an awning to keep the full moon off his face. A blazing day was often followed by a yelling south-easter with *Wylo* plunging and thrusting her bowsprit under water. Cups jumped on the hooks. Frank prayed for the wind to die away. South-east gales made the crossing to Oesterval difficult; the dinghy had to be nursed in the channels when the wind blew against the tide and caused almost vertical seas. Frank rowed with his head turned, watching for the oncoming seas, heading the dinghy into them, slowing down when they struck. He would reach the farm with a crick in the neck only to find that they had not expected him in such weather and had sold all the milk.

After the wind the heat returned. Eighty three degrees in the cabin for

seven days on end. In spite of the heavy tarpaulin over the deck the butter ran like salad oil. Yet there were summer nights when it was possible to forget the heat and the wind. A vast tumble of cloud in the night sky, a crescent moon riding high. And stillness. Frank longed for stillness and on such nights he said that he lived in the very temple of life. At times the sky was so studded with stars that it was hard to discover a black space. The avocets chimed on the beach. Constable Hill became a dark hump among the stars. Frank would listen to *Wylo* talking softly to herself and then he knew that he was tired enough to go to his bunk.

Before dawn he would be in the dinghy, making for Langebaan and the store. In the dim light Constable Hill resembled a mound of earth in an

aquarium; he expected to see fabulous creatures weaving over the crest. Even at that hour the air was so mild that he rowed naked, his clothes bundled on the after thwart. When the sun came up he would throw a small grapnel on a sandbank and swim. By the time he had reached Langebaan the sun would be roasting the village. Though he wore only singlet and jeans he would be soaked with sweat. When he had rowed away from the village the cliff on the eastern shore hid him from the road. He threw off his clothes and swam again. With the tide in his favour it was an easy trip back to Wylo; he stood and sculled, a towel round his waist, and plunged over the side continually. Back on board the yacht he would beat up a raw egg in a mug of farm milk. Then he chose a seamanlike job; making the deck

watertight, perhaps, for the coming winter. At four o'clock in the afternoon he would eat a sandwich of homemade bread with chopped onion and a sliver of cheese. Then the letters and the newspapers. "A gorgeous life," he told me. "I sometimes wonder if I have earned it."

But in summer he longed for the rare showers and when the glass fell he became hopeful. "Please God it will rain tomorrow," he prayed. "If it does I shall walk over the veld to Sixteen-Mile Beach exulting in the rain and the smell of the wet earth. After being fried it is a tremendous sensation to feel the chill on your flesh when the wind blows over your wet body and your salt-caked hair becomes soft and docile."

During one sweltering day the wind swung to the north-east, the sky

clouded over and Frank walked to Sixteen-Mile Beach to swim in the cold sea. (The lagoon is usually warmer than Muizenberg.) That day he watched something he had never seen before. Dark clouds were pouring millions of gallons of water into the ocean two miles offshore. Not a drop reached the parched earth. The wind was blowing dead onshore. As the clouds neared the land, cascading their precious water, they were dispersed by columns of hot air from the red-hot earth. By the time the earth had cooled the clouds had drifted away to the south.

One late December day Frank was cutting across the peninsula from the ocean beach to Kraal Bay when he encountered another unusual experience. He heard a threshing sound, like a river flowing strongly over

shallow rocks. He swung round and saw a sandduivel, a whirlwind tearing leaves, twigs and seeds from the bushes. The centre was filled with revolving debris. It was moving towards him and he awaited the impact with a sort of curiosity. As it struck each patch of veld on its course the bushes dipped, lost their leaves and came upright again like skeletons. It reached Frank, not with the blast he had expected but with an upward pull. Sand beneath his feet drove into his nostrils and his hair rose. Unseen objects struck every part of his body and the sand stung his tight eyelids. Then it passed. He watched the whirlwind going on and gaining height, dark with the loose rubbish of the veld. When he reached Kraal Bay he had to swim face downwards rubbing the sand out of his hair. It took

a long time. He did not wish to encounter another *sandduivel*.

So Frank watched the glass anxiously and longed for autumn and the rains. A dry April with seventeen days of southerly wind left him almost in despair; the veld was scorched and he found solace only in long spells of swimming. "Woe is me, who loves the Cape winter," he complained to me. Then the rains came from the west in huge anvil clouds. The gonging in the rigging rose to a dramatic pitch and Wylo crouched back taut on her chain. For a time there was a drumming flood with hail; then the ferocity dwindled and Frank heard the water running pleasantly, in a more leisurely way, in the scuppers. Looking through the hatch he saw a rainbow. It was without blemish, the great arch touching down in the east where Frank went for his

milk and eggs; and in the west, perhaps on Dassen Island, among the penguins braying their ancient wisdom.

One year the summer went out with a bang. After six weeks of unrelenting southerlies the northerly came through. It rained in torrents, the sun was hidden for thirty-six hours, Wylo was cleansed and shining and every tank and jar was filled with soft water. The glass was still going down. The earth was fragrant. Cattle licked the water from their flanks, birds shrilled and frogs gonged. Constable Hill looked like a glacier with streams cascading down the slopes. Soon the earth's brown skin, the colour of a Bushman, was dusted with faint green things so tiny that Frank had to kneel down to see them as individuals. Ten thousand of them to every square foot.

Frank said there was always a “day of presage” before the coming of winter, a day that looked like others but felt different. On one such day he saw two large Caspian terns flying high over the lagoon. He had observed that terns were nearly always seen in pairs. Their strange cries were cold and remote like the ice from which they had come. He watched one bird taking station over the other. After a series of calls that mounted to a crescendo they came flaming down from the sky, wings folded against their bodies like gannets. They twisted and darted as they came, but still they maintained their positions like airy dancers. As they neared the water they spread their wings, flattened out and streaked away across the lagoon, calling, calling, calling. Another of the great winter transformations came to the lagoon

and Frank spoke with deep feeling: “I love watching the reluctant death of the abominable summer. Twice the sky has taken on the deep ringing blue of winter and the earth, helped by drenching dews, has given off its fragrance during the night. Soon the high pale sky of summer will be a well-lost memory. I wish it would never come back. The seasons may be a delusion, too, ultimately; but they present me with a private reality, tested and savoured through the years.” Frank knew all the signs, like a farmer or a fisherman. Sometimes it blew from the ever hopeful north but the wind would be too warm for rain. Then the temperature would go down four degrees and he would close the hatches and ports. A whisper on the decks would strengthen to a sharp tattoo. After five minutes of heavy rain

Frank would begin to wonder whether the black fruitful earth would be washed down to the beaches. It was startling to gaze out of the hatch and find the bright and savage lagoon turned into a soft green waste.

Towards the end of another summer I stood with Frank watching Nature working to inscrutable ends. The lagoon had put on one of her "grey nun" evenings. The light was like milk. The sky was shrouded and mysterious. The sun, dropping beneath the canopy of cloud, fired low shafts of pale light dimmed into pastel shades by the sea mist hanging in the air. Clouds were touched with amethyst and rose. Beneath the ceiling of cloud the waters of the lagoon were an unreflecting green. The lagoon shone with that same green when primitive man reigned there. Only the

birds seemed to acknowledge life and time; their chiming on the shore was like the soft clashing of glass beads.

A great period of the year for Frank was early winter. "The glass is low and falling," he told me one day when I met him on the beach. "Perhaps tomorrow I shall wear my waterproof cape and stand on deck exulting; watching and wishing I had the power to paint the scene. I want to see the veld adorned with lakelets and all the little feathered things flirting their yearly bath. As I come upon them they will be shrilling and fluffing their feathers. They will hop aside from my plodding feet, their thready legs ready. As I pass they will return and plunge into the puddle I have disturbed. That is life - the passing moment. Seize it! For it is there we live, in each passing

moment. Remember last winter? Those clustered flowers?”

After two light rains one March the earth was dusted with a tender green mantle of young things emerging for their brief cycle. “I hope the next shower is not too long delayed,” Frank said. “It is hateful to see them die before they have lived.” Two months later the winter had set in with so much rain that the lagoon country showed promise of becoming a huge flower-stall. “God grant it,” said Frank earnestly. “The farmers are rejoicing and their ploughs are turning up the dark earth. If only the French perfumers could capture this entrancing smell in their expensive bottles it would be far more alluring than their sexy concoctions.”

The winter became summery again that winter. Frank swam several times

a day and seldom wore clothes on the yacht. In the evenings he sat down naked at his typewriter. The oldest lagooners could not remember such winter months. Winter, the winter Frank loved, sometimes brought ordeals for the man who rowed so much. He left his dinghy at one of the lagoon villages when he went to town. When he returned in pouring rain, soaked in the back of an open motor-lorry he would find a snorting north-wester blowing. This was a “dead muzzler” for the passage to Wylo in the dinghy. Lagooners assured him he would sink. Their warnings never stopped him but he knew that he would have to spend more than three hours at the oars. In that sort of weather he could not even stop to wipe his nose or he would lose in ten seconds all he had gained in ten

minutes. When he entered his cabin at last he lit the stove for warmth, thawed out over it, made a pot of tea and fell into his bunk.

Winter on the lagoon is milder than in Cape Town, but there were times when Frank had to wear two pairs of trousers and two jerseys while he rowed to the farm before sunrise. He also had a pair of “storm mittens”. Then he devised a strip of canvas with arm-holes; it went across his back and stopped the cold spray when he was rowing. He wore a sou’wester and put on more conventional clothes before visiting the villages. Later he acquired a postman’s cape and found this useful.

Such was the life of Frank Armstrong Wightman during those early years on the lagoon. “I think the appeal of the place to me is that I never know

whether I love it or loathe it,” Frank remarked to me at this period. “I only know with certainty that when I am in the rat race of the city this lagoon has the glamour of Avalon, an unimaginable splendour.”

CHAPTER 9

WILD LIFE HARBOUR

*A certain degree of solitude seems
necessary
to the full growth and spread of the
highest mind.*

NOVALIS

ONCE YOU enter the veld the lagoon country and the coast are full of life. Here are buck and the savage creatures that prey on young buck. Frank Wightman spoke to me of many chance encounters on the veld; strange and unpredictable episodes ranging from the rescue of a steenbok to the rare spectacle of a fight between tortoises.

For three summer months a band of prospectors camped with their native labourers on Constable Hill, where they blasted and dug for phosphates. They had a bulldozer at work making

a track to the pits, there was talk of building a factory, and it seemed to a despairing Frank that the peace of Kraal Bay would be ruined for ever. Then the venture was found to be unprofitable and the prospectors departed. Frank climbed the scarred hillside to see what they had done. He found deep vertical shafts with huge mounds of phosphates. At the bottom of a shaft was a steenbok, on its feet; so that it had obviously escaped breaking its slender legs. He hurried back to the yacht for a coil of rope; he made the rope fast round a rock and went down the shaft. The little buck was weak and frightened. He had to tie the legs together and then he started back with the buck hanging on his back. With no footholds the quivering buck seemed heavy; the steenbok that looked small and frail bounding away

over the veld. He only just had the strength to reach the top of the pit. Drenched with sweat, he dragged off his clothes and stumbled down the hill naked to a spring with the buck in his arms. When the buck smelt water it struggled and Frank released it and watched. The buck went for the water as though the man did not exist, and Frank lay there watching for an hour, cooled by the sea breeze. The buck slaked its raging thirst and lay down near its rescuer; it had come to no harm. Presently it licked its coat and nibbled the grass round the spring greedily. Frank left it there, went down to his boat and swam until he had refreshed his tired body. But those pits claimed other victims. Once he was in his cabin when he heard a young goat bleating on the hill. It had lost itself among the phosphate

workings and had been trapped. Frank rowed to the shore and helped the goat to safety; he rescued the suffering animal but it had a broken leg. On the road he met a farmer and turned away as the man killed it quickly with a hunting knife.

Near the summit of Constable Hill lived a *rooikat* family. Frank never spoke to the lagooners about this discovery for the lynx is among the farmers' worst enemies, a killer of sheep and lambs and poultry, hares and other small mammals. A lynx will bite chunks of flesh out of the fat tails of sheep too large to kill. They sleep during the day, as a rule, and emerge from their lairs to hunt the wild birds, mice and any other living thing they can pull down. Young jackals stand no chance against this fierce relative of the domestic cat. A large male lynx is

twice the size of your household pet and has been mistaken for a small leopard. So secretive are they that naturalists know little of their habits. They are hard to find. When cornered by dogs a pair of lynxes with kittens will show the grim courage of the caracal breed and put up a memorable defence. Frank liked to catch glimpses of the lynx family though he was horrified by their voracious ways. They are like red cats with green eyes, pointed, tufted ears and short tails. Watch them stalking a guinea-fowl or seabird (though you will seldom have the chance) and see how they use every scrap of cover up to the last moment. The kittens are as fast as their elders, balls of red fur one moment, streaks of fire the next, spitting and snarling angrily. Lagooners say that a lynx will attack

even such a large and tough buck as a duiker, keeping clear of the horns and going for the throat. Frank often saw the remains of their feasts on his beach for they came down from the hill at night to lie in wait for seabirds. Once he heard a peculiar croaking and found in the morning that they had torn a crane to pieces. The beach was like a charnel-house. Even more revolting was a sudden vision he had of the mother of three kittens growling over what appeared to be a human corpse. Then he saw that it was a dead porpoise. Soon afterwards there were only the bones and the dried-out skull with its projecting bill and tiny teeth. He came upon their lair on Constable Hill by following the spoor and finding a heap of penguin feathers. A menacing hiss warned him that the lynxes were under the rocks. For a

moment he saw the ears of the mother laid back on a flattened skull, the kittens cowering behind her. He moved away quickly.

Another day he approached a jackal and her pups among the dunes. He had come from the beach and walked into a hollow where they were sheltering from the strong wind. They had brought dead fish with them from the shore but evidently this was not to their taste. Mother and pups were rolling in the sand. When they saw the man they scattered instantly and ran off, each one taking a different route. Thus the jackal survives in the old, settled Cape districts.

Frank used to watch the dassies gliding up and down the vertical rocks of Constable Hill as though they were using an oiled surface. Their blunt little bodies have coarse hair and they

resemble the guinea-pig. Some call them rock-rabbits, though there is nothing rabbitry about them. This pug-faced animal barks and whistles. It appears in the Bible as a coney; in modern scientific literature as a *hyrax* or *Procaia capensis*; and it has recently been fixed by zoologists as a humble relative of the elephant. Their teeth, skeletons and unusual flattened toes solved the old mystery. Pads on the feet act not by suction but as friction grips, and each hind foot has a special claw for climbing. In the hungry years of the Van Riebeeck period the Saldanha garrison hunted the dassies on these hills for their meat.

One day Frank was making for Constable Hill along a narrow game track when he came upon two small tortoises butting each other with heads

withdrawn. They pushed doggedly with lizard-like hind legs but the cause of the battle seemed inexplicable. Then one of them turned over and lay on its back with helpless legs waving. The victor waddled off like a triumphant military tank. An overturned tortoise must find a purchase, a twig or a stone, or it may die where it has fallen; but this one found nothing. Frank put it on its feet again and retreated to watch. Five minutes passed. The tiny Chinese face emerged from the shell a fraction of an inch. Warily the eyes peered round. The neck came out like perished rubber. A glance behind. At last the great decision was made and the tortoise crawled away into the bush.

I think Frank was the only person in the lagoon world who admired the snakes. Often he nearly stepped on

them as he wandered over the veld. Once a frightened ringhals cobra spat at his eyes but the deadly spray was carried off by a strong wind blowing between them. Another time he was clambering over a rock when he almost touched a lazy puffadder and he had to leap wildly to escape. Sea cobras floated down the lagoon with the tide, their flat tails fashioned for swimming. Land cobras took to the water occasionally, and Frank sighted a six-footer, the yellow koperkapel of the lagooners, trying to make the beach after an exhausting struggle. He helped it to land, cautiously, from his dinghy, and watched it slide off into the spring flowers. One day in summer a swimming boomslang came to the yawl for a rest and coiled itself round the mizzen-outrigger stay. Frank knelt on deck and studied the large black

snake with its huge eyes. Head and jaws, covered with scales, gave him the impression of something tiny and accurate made by a Swiss watch craftsman. After a time he touched the coils and the boomslang slithered off and headed for the beach.

Large scorpions lurk under the stones beside the lagoon and are looked upon with fear and hatred by the lagooners. No one ever forgets the painful sting of the aggressive thick-tailed scorpion with the small nippers. Young children collapse and sometimes die after being stung; even prompt injections of serum do not always save them. Spiders of many species are common in the lagoon area though only the button spiders are dangerous. Frank went to a museum once to identify this menace of the wheat fields, shaped like a round black button with a red spot. It

is a close relative of the black widow of other lands, and the venom is so potent that some victims die in agony if they do not receive immediate serum treatment. The headman and nineteen labourers on Jutten Island suffered from button-spider bites some years ago. The spiders were blown across the half mile of water from the mainland by a strong south-caster, and for a time the island was infested with them. All the men recovered, to the surprise of the doctors. Sometimes the harmless gossamer spider appears in great numbers and the veld shimmers with millions of webs. Frank found his skin covered with gossamer and spiders as he rowed back to the yawl stripped to the waist; and he had to brush the spiders from his eyes as they settled over the lids. When he reached

the yawl every spar, rope and stay was streaming with the glassy webs.

Far more embarrassing was another sudden reminder of the lagoon's insect world. One year the veld failed to produce the flowers which the bees expected to find. Swarms of bees appeared in unexpected places, bees starving for their accustomed flowers and seeking any form of sweetness. Frank was sugaring his tea on board *Wylo* when a swarm picked up his sweetened breath and hung round the cabin. He was away on shore later that day when a queen bee blundered on to the yawl during her flight across the lagoon. When he climbed on board there was a solid mass of squirming bees over the drop-slide of the cabin hatch. He would have been stung to death if he had opened the hatch so he entered by the fore-hatch and shut it

quickly. That night the food he had just bought remained in the dinghy alongside. In the morning the bees were still there. He stripped so that he could dive overboard and went for the bees with a wet sack. Now and again he had to take to the water and hang on to the dinghy until the bees had lost the scent. Then he returned to the attack. He cleared the bees and treated eleven stings. "I hated to do it, for I like bees and their honey," Frank told me. "But I had to live in that ship." He swept up a bucketful of dead bees. For the rest of the day he was pestered by bees coming from the veld to find their cluster gone. A lagoon family did not fare so well. They opened a watermelon, and the luscious perfume of it brought a cloud of bees down on them. All of them were stung and one

woman had to be rushed to the doctor for treatment.

Largest of the birds in the lagoon country, largest indeed of all living birds, are the ostriches. Their ancestors were wild. Then the owners of Geelbek and other farms tamed and pampered them for the soft and beautiful plumage of the cock birds; the snow-white feathers on wings and tail, the jet black body feathers. World War I came and the feather boom crashed. Selective breeding ended and the ostriches returned to the unfenced veld. They found their own seeds and berries, herbs and grass and insects, pebbles for their gizzards. And they soon became as fierce as their prehistoric ancestors.

During one of our long walks near the ocean beach Frank showed me a large shallow depression between the dunes

where a pair of ostriches had nested. He had seen it filled with more than a dozen enormous yellow eggs. Sometimes the birds left the nest for a while, leaving the sun to warm the eggs. As a rule the small, drab hen, like a dusty shawl of feathers, sat on the eggs by day while the black male guarded the nest at night; a perfect example of protective colouring. The lagooners told Frank that lynxes stole and ate the huge eggs when they found an unprotected nest. He never saw those robbers but he did watch a pied crow dropping stones on the eggs until it was able to break a hard shell and secure a rich feast.

Six weeks passed after the ostriches had made the nest and Frank observed the chicks that had emerged from the shattered eggs. Large and plump they were, with enormous eyes. Their

feathers were mere spikes and they resembled hedgehogs as they rolled helplessly in the nest. Frank was fascinated by the spectacle and crept fairly close. Suddenly his ears picked up the sound of distant feet pounding on sand. He knew the vicious cock ostrich was approaching and he ran for the surf. The great bird had seen him. It raced for the beach at the speed of a galloping horse, booming like a lion, wings held clear of the thighs, head back, long neck swaying with emotion. Frank knew that ostriches were powerful swimmers but he was fairly sure that the surf would halt the angry cock. He also knew that the curved nail on the foot of an ostrich could rip the guts out of a man; so he stayed in the water fully clothed while the ostrich stamped with rage on the edge of the sea. Sometimes it chafed

its wings and boomed its war cry; then it crouched with wings spread wide as though about to charge. One kick would mean a broken arm or leg; a full attack could only end in death. Frank had to decide whether the cock ostrich would enter the water. In that event the only defence left would be to race to the dry sand and lie flat. In his dilemma he remembered the fights he had watched between cock birds in the mating season; frenzied enemies seven feet high tearing out flesh and feathers with tremendous curving strokes of the feet. If he lay flat the ostrich would only trample and bruise him; the kick would be ineffective. Frank gazed at the ostrich and summed up his chances while the black and menacing eyes swept over him. Battered by the surf, he remained in the water. At last the serpent neck turned away from him

and the ostrich leapt back to the nest, legs plunging like pistons, each stride covering twenty feet.

Frank spoke of the ostriches as “great feathered reptiles”. At times he regarded them as grotesque ballet dancers with heavy bodies poised on the gigantic legs like rocking-horses; blue thighs almost human in shape, muscular legs striking down to the sand with immense strength, stark featherless legs. Certainly they are dancers. You see them waltzing soon after dawn; feathers ruffled, wings raised, spinning to the music of the wind and the surf. Cock birds kick and prance madly during these displays, their feet moving up as high as a man’s head. Frank noticed that they usually reserved their energy for overcast weather; they would not dance under a burning sun. He also

watched the mating dance, when the cock bird struts before the dingy brown hen and fluffs out its plumes. All the ostrich dances end in whirls of ecstasy, leaving the huge creatures utterly exhausted.

The ostriches bathed in the vleis in winter. At other times, when the land dried up, the hen birds would lead their chicks down to the lagoon. I hid behind a bush with Frank on the shore of Kraal Bay and stared at these processions. The mother would mince along ahead, each chick a replica. “They are all knock-kneed, but in a mild and well-bred way,” Frank remarked with a smile. “All in the same uniform, you notice. Speckled heads and necks, mottled coats, soft yellow down. Just like young ladies at a finishing school.”

I found it hard to imagine that the tiny, attractive chicks would one day roar in anger and swallow live tortoises. Now they were on the move again, spinning round, aiming at some mysterious destination in the remote veld. In a few seconds the family had almost vanished, leaving the flamingos stalking the sandbanks of the lagoon. There was a last vision, the small head of the mother streaking away like a comet. From the baked, resonant earth came the drum-beats of her feet. "She's an old piston locomotive under a canopy of feathers," laughed Frank.

Lagooners often cook ostrich meat and ostrich eggs. Casualties among the foolish young birds are heavy for they wound themselves against barbed-wire fences and run into every kind of danger. Small chicks roll on their backs and lie squawking and helpless

until the older birds help them up. Ostriches show great bravery and cunning in distracting the attention of people whom they suspect of having designs on the chicks. Motorists and men on horseback know that when the ostriches approach them with all the antics of ballet dancers they are really trying to divert attention from the hens and chicks. Ostriches are no longer the pampered darlings of *haute couture*, but they have a value. Feather dusters are useful. Scrambled ostrich egg is enjoyed by people who are not epicures and even the tough meat comes as a change from a fish diet. The biltong made from the leg is probably the least appetising of dried meats but ostrich polony is passable.

Ostriches are fantastic and only in certain poses are they beautiful. The flamingos of the lagoon have gross

voices but their bodies are finer than any likeness achieved in Audubon's paintings. Frank watched them year after year, gliding over Constable Hill in March or April, flying low over the water on wings of black and crimson, resting on the beaches. Down at the southern end of the lagoon there is a large island, more of a sanctuary than the shore, where at long intervals Frank found them nesting and breeding. Sometimes the flamingos seem tired, scraggy and almost colourless on arrival, but after a month of the lagoon their plumage flames again.

Kingfishers visit the lagoon but they are not everyday birds in these parts. Frank observed one on the cross-trees of *Wylo*, the back a glowing blue, the under body reddish. When a kingfisher selects a fish it is like aiming a rifle.

He goes down with folded wings, opens them on the surface of the water, and returns to his perch in a dazzle of colour, a gleaming sliver jerking in his beak. Hawks nest on Constable Hill, feeding on the field mice of the peninsula and fighting their way back to the heights against a nor'-wester when evening comes. There, too, the *suikerbekkies* are like tiny green bullets. They desert the lagoon for a part of the dry season, returning to streak from bush to bush in search of fresh nectar. Often a sacred ibis colony floats over the hill on the up-draughts, birds of white plumage with broad, black-edged wings. Their heavy, downward-curving bills give them an air of dejection. Indeed they are persecuted birds, for they breed on the guano islands, kill the young seabirds, and

are massacred in turn by the guardians of the islands.

Wheatfield's near the lagoon attract larks and pipits, wheat eaters and lapwings and the Cape ground-robins known locally as boskruipers. Seedeaters and buntings love the thick bush of the lagoon valleys. Grey plovers were noted by Frank in flocks two thousand strong. These plump waders are migrants from the Arctic, but some remain on the lagoon all the year round. Sanderlings are abundant on the sandbanks except in midwinter. Large numbers of bar-tailed godwits are seen in a sandpit on the eastern shore of the lagoon, a bird which is rare in other parts of the Cape. Ornithologists have observed that the lagoon is an important wintering area for a number of Palearctic waders. Small pans, partly flooded at high tide,

are their feeding grounds when the central mud banks are covered at high tide.

Two birds that Frank could not identify inspired one of the most poetic descriptions he ever narrated to me. He was strolling along the white chalk road that runs from the lagoon to the ocean; a long, rambling pathway that is in no hurry to leave the cool green springtime veld. Ahead was the iron clamour of the sea; behind him the enormous expanse of the lagoon, like a field of bluebells. The two birds kept Frank company, whirring from bush to bush. "They were tiny birds with blinding viridian corselets and cummerbunds of scarlet," Frank said. "They clutched twigs no thicker than matches that jiggled them up and down in the wind. They opened wide their queer beaks to squeak an old song full

of bird lore. Then, like bright emerald bullets, they shot off to the next bush. When I stopped beside them they went on singing until they seemed likely to burst - a song pitched so high that it was not really what we call sound. You might hear that sort of music if an elf sat in a buttercup and played you a fierce little cadenza on a violin the size of a bean."

Of course the seabirds dominate the lagoon scene and the greatest of these is the wandering albatross. Frank spent hours watching the great birds. Always on the wing, they use the air currents of Constable Hill as a playground for their magnificent feats of soaring. With a strong northerly an albatross would do wonderful things. At one moment the body and wings would make a huge white cross alongside the yawl, one jet-black

wingtip almost touching the water. During that sensational low vertical bank the enormous white bird would show its hooded beak, sharp as a carving-knife, then swoop away with only a slight tremor at the extreme points of the wings, only a mere tilting of the body to give power and direction. The beak reminded Frank of yarns of these ferocious birds attacking drowning men. Here was the monarch of the seas, largest of all the birds that fly, with a wingspan of fourteen feet and a streamlined body as large as a swan. A monarch, but also a murderer. Frank was rowing across the lagoon in dense fog when an albatross suddenly appeared beside the dinghy; it had obviously scented the man and come down to investigate and get its bearings. "It seemed as large as a room in the deceptive light

of the fog,” said Frank. “I was startled and enchanted by this unexpected vision and the bird was as surprised as I was. Then it vanished as silently as it had come.” The albatross must have flown all the way from its nest in the high extinct crater of Tristan da Cunha, voyaging without sleep or rest. Such a bird needs its speed of fifty miles an hour, and it has that and more in reserve. Saldanha fishermen catch them now and then with baited hooks, a cruel end for a splendid bird.

Frank watched an albatross working its way against a gale on a day when every other bird had taken shelter. The taut wings were flexed stiffly at the tips but the streamlined body seemed to be asleep. What was the purpose? The bird picked up nothing from the water. Was it pure amusement in this “storm in a teacup” after the gales the

albatross had known down in the Southern Ocean? The albatross floated past *Wylo* without a sign of feeling. The yacht might have been nothing more than a wave in a life whose span was measured by waves. One heartbeat in a long life. The albatross was remote and inaccessible. It had come from a kingdom established in the dawn of time, a kingdom of lone islands and icebergs. Cape Horn, like a gaunt splinter of rock and earth and thundering gales and great seas like the rout of an army; that was the kingdom of the albatross. Frank wondered how these huge birds could be so serene in that world of turmoil. So unlike the human race.

Shearwaters also come up from the south in great diversity of size and colouring to enliven the lagoon scene. The sooty shearwater is black as night

until it reveals light grey under the wings. This is the *malbaartjie* of the fishermen. Frank discovered that the strange name went right back to the early slave days when mild and intelligent Malabar people were brought to the Cape; no doubt there was some physical resemblance. Shearwaters ride the winds with the same lazy and invisible power as the albatrosses. They, too, are lords of the air beside the ungainly gulls. Passing over the masthead of *Wylo* with rigid wings they shudder only in the gusts. They might almost be sleeping as they rise without a cry from the surface to a thousand feet above the lagoon. Both the shearwater and the albatross visit the lagoon only when there is heavy weather on the open sea. They are remote and aloof, preferring the vast,

unbroken ocean until they are driven to seek food in calmer waters.

One day Frank had made some pancakes with bacon fat when three great shearwaters flew down the wind, slanting tipping, soaring. He broke up a pancake and threw the bits high into the air just to watch the birds come down. It was beautifully done. They crowded together and hung on the wind, their heads twisting as they eyed the bobbing morsels. Then the narrow wings were "reefed-in" close to their bodies, opening wide again as they hovered over the pieces of food. Each morsel disappeared. Then came the inexplicable action with the long blades which sent each bird rocketing into the sky without apparent movement. They must have swallowed their food at leisure a thousand feet above the yacht.

Gulls come as an anti-climax, vociferous and ludicrous. They have to “pump” the air to keep going, and only when the wind is right on Constable Hill do they soar. “Everywhere here majesty is countered by absurdity,” Frank remarked. Often he saw a gull with a broken leg; indeed, many seabirds were maimed in this way, from the largest down the scale to the sandpipers. He cut a slice from a home-made loaf for the gull and threw it over the side of the yacht. The gull swooped on it fiercely and forced the bread down its writhing neck before the other screaming gulls could fall upon him. Arctic terns often fished alongside the yacht after a suspicious glance at the man in the cockpit. They are great travellers, breeding in the north and flying as far south as the pack-ice. When the little pilchards

crowd into Kraal Bay the terns plummet down and feast on them. Some of the large red-billed terns nest on Marcus Island, where the herons are also at home.

Frank was a bird-watcher who shunned reference books, colour plates, Latin names and scientific detail. “The greatest enemy of knowing is knowledge,” he declared. “Conventional bird-watchers do not see the beauty of the bird at all. Hang labels on a thing and you obscure the beauty. If a rare bird arrives of a species I have never seen before it is a wonderful mystery. I do not wish to know more or the wonder might pass.”

In a good year the Saldanha landscape blazes with wild flowers which some botanists regard as the finest array in the world. Namaqualand has its solid

“painted acres” aflame with colour. Flower patches at Saldanha are smaller, but there are so many varieties that Frank was dazzled by the hundreds of different blossoms. Even the coastal dunes are transformed all the way from Saldanha to Table Bay. Round the lagoon are some of the most spectacular meadows of all and some of the rarest flowers.

These flowers from one small district in the Cape have become world famous. Centuries ago the seeds were carried off in triumph by visiting botanists from Europe;²⁰ and now they are blazing every year in gardens from Murmansk to Kew, Vienna to Sydney. Latrobe the missionary saw the spring in this district early last century. He followed a track through country

which was at other times a wilderness, without a cultivated spot, and he wrote; “But the bountiful Creator has likewise here clothed the waste with an incomparable profusion of flowers which in some places cover the sand between the bushes as with a rich carpet.” Another traveller declared: “Though their reign is brief because of their fragility, they have made history in all parts of the world, particularly the scabious, the nemesias, ixias and the bewildering range of *pypies*, some of which have startled even the most experienced botanists.”

Dorothea Fairbridge, authority on Cape wild flowers (and Cape houses) came on the scene early this century and declared that she had seen the shores of Saldanha Bay so thickly set with orange gazanias, the wild marigolds known as *gousblom*, that it hurt

²⁰ See appendix: Thunberg, Dr. C. P.

the eyes to look at them from the sea. There, too, she saw the giant blue forget-me-not, *Anchusa capensis*, growing in blaze patches. Cape gardeners were inclined to sneer at their own wild flowers in those days; but when Miss Fairbridge went to Kew every weed of the veld seemed to be in blossom in the houses, labelled with Latin names which gave them an air of distinction.

When autumn comes, early in April perhaps, there may be half-an-hour's rain. A day or two later Frank would see the little green lives of the earth thrusting up to the sun for their brief spell. Torrential rains may fall early in May and then the lagoon country becomes green as an English field and the flowers are like a Swiss meadow. Constable Hill is a huge emerald. But the rains are more dramatic at this

moment than the veld. They come in from the west in enormous anvil clouds; a flood of hail, a drumming on the earth, and finally a rainbow.

June and the veld really comes to life, a tender awakening after a night of thunder. Frank searched for the first flower and discovered it, alone, and made obeisance to the white, petalled star; he knew that soon he would be walking meekly through vast crowds of blooms. Until he slept their scents were with him. Now the whole land is a singing green. On the farms the slender wheat comes up, row upon row, and the earth soaked by rain gives out tremendous fragrance. July, and more flowers are breaking the surface in tiny eruptions of colour. Each has its own personality. Low on the earth are the *vygies*, clusters of succulent mesembs. Soon the veld will

be aflame. "Frail and vulnerable they may be, but do not mourn for them" Frank said. "A million eyes follow the sun from rising to setting - the eyes of lives briefer than ours, yet far more vivid."

Not often, but now and again the rainfall is too heavy. Wheat fields go down in wash aways to the lagoon and tracks become impassable. Vleis appear, deep enough to sail a boat. The flowers are triumphant, and there are more waiting their turn and certain of their welcome. Out in Kraal Bay the rejoicing earth reaches into the cabin of the yacht and fills it with the aromas of the veld.

Usually there is enough rain. Saldanha is like a bit of coastal Morocco, with a Mediterranean climate to the south and a Sahara in the north. Saldanha gets ten to fifteen inches of rain a year,

from May to August. But there are grim years when the winter only begins in August; when the rains come pelting down, day after day, for a week on end. Red scars appear on the green of hilly wheat fields where the young wheat has been washed away. After a dry winter, and there can be three in succession, the September flowers are seen only as patches in moist hollows. But faithful Constable Hill always showed Frank its *gousblom*, orange and white, its sweet-scented *babiana*, its mushrooms and moss and ferns. Up there every growth is safe from the grazing cattle.

Frank liked the homely Afrikaans names which describe the looks of the flowers so cleverly that the Latin descriptions seem dull. Such names as *Wolbaard suikerbos* and *spinnekopblom*, *sambrieltjie* and *geel kattendert*



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all speak for themselves; so do *jakkalstert* and *swartbekkie*, *klapper-tjies* and *uiltjies*. However, we have to go back to the Latin for accuracy. *Nemesias* are the pride of the area from Hopefield round the great bay and south to Darling village. Pink and cream they grow, red and amber, mauve and rose, blue and white with orange centres; some on stems a foot high. Eighty years ago Miss Hildagonda Duckitt of Darling sent *nemesias* seeds to a firm in England and this firm broadcast them so widely that they are now to be seen wherever gardens flourish. This is a snapdragon, but the Cape varieties have many names. Some are known as *wees-kindertjies*, orphans. Those with the largest flowers are “Cape gems”. In their natural surroundings they do not mix their colours; white *nemesias*

grow in one place, mauve in another and orange farther on. Rarest of all that Frank identified was the splendid flame *nemesias*, found only on the farm Skilpadfontein.

On board *Wyllo* I often saw a vase with *chinchinchees*. These waxen flowers are white with a brown eye, though a coastal variety is black-eyed. They received their strange name when Thunberg the Swedish botanist noticed the sound made by the stalks rubbing together. British and American florists sell them as “Star of Bethlehem” blooms. Millions of them are exported, mainly from the country to the south of Saldanha; and they have become so valuable in recent years that farmers have to protect their fields against night raiders. Bees visit them but cattle leave them alone, for they are poisonous. Generations of children

have offered bundles of “chinks” to motorists and rejoiced in their reward.

Frank Wightman knew all the flower perfumes. He told me that Dr. John Hutchinson of Kew selected the blue-flowered *babiana* as the sweetest flower he had ever encountered during a long career as a botanist. It reminded him of the English primrose. Baboons love to dig up the bulbs for food, hence the name *bobbejaantjie*, and the Hottentots followed this example. Their beauty is as memorable as the scent. The sky-blue flowers open at dawn to feed upon the dew and are gone at nightfall. Some of the *kalkoentjies* are noted for their powerful scent, especially the greener ones which bloom in the sandveld. There is a rose-pink variety in the Darling district. Another member of this gladiolus family has orange,

hooded flowers. The yellow *kalkoentjie* is found everywhere, but round the vlei at the famous Oude Post farm is a rich butter-coloured gladiolus which is unknown elsewhere. The Blue Afrikaner or *sandpypie* usually has mauve flowers and this flourishes in sandy places from midwinter to spring. Botanists are unable to explain why the small coastal variety has no scent whereas a similar small one flowering inland has a memorable fragrance.

Arums grow like weeds in these districts, serving not only as cut flowers and bouquets for brides but also as nourishing food for pigs when boiled. (The rootstock contains starch.) The delicate lily-like scent of the arum may be inhaled during midwinter and spring, when the flowers appear. Belladonna lilies, which arise

suddenly on bare ground in dry heat at the end of summer, have an overpowering aroma. A large variety is seen at Langebaan. Some have crimson flowers, others are white or rose-pink. The bulbs are poisonous.

Australian blue gums and wattle have invaded the flower country of Saldanha. Only when the wattle throws out its golden ball-flowers can you overlook the smothering of the natural growths. Wattle spread over the Cape by accident. A tannery ordered seed for leather-curing and the wrong seed arrived. It was dumped on the shores of Table Bay and distributed by strong winds. These exotic scrub trees bind the sand dunes, but flower lovers deplore the evil results in a Garden of Eden. Near the Saldanha coast you find the wax berry bush, *Myrica cordifolia*, a shrub that

halts the dunes. Frank learnt that the lagooners boiled the berries in water, strained the hot mixture and allowed the melted wax to solidify. It supplied them with floor polish, soap and candles. At the seaside are the beautiful *Antholyzas*, known locally as “rats’-tails”, with flame-coloured flowers growing sideways. Pink paper-flowers also decorate the dunes for months. Here, too, is a *Solamin* with poisonous flowers like deadly nightshade.

October sees the end of many spring flowers as the land dries up, but huge masses of Cape blue haze, *Selago spuria*, often remain in bloom until January. Some of the *mesembs* also survive the coming of summer. This area is famous for its *mesembs*, especially the Buck Bay *vygie* in many colours, almost blinding when seen at

its best in huge sheets. The flowers resemble daisies and are found in all the colours of a Persian carpet. Children and many animals seek the sweet-sour pulp of the “Hottentot figs” produced by the coastal *Mesembryanthemum edulis*: though there is another variety known as *ware suur-vyg*, which has a superior fruit. Cattle enjoy the succulent leaves. Hildagonda Duckitt recommended the bruised and strained juice from the leaves as a gargle. One species is burnt and the lye extracted from the ash for soap-making. More than four hundred species of *Mesembryanthemum* have been identified and discoveries are still being made in well-explored areas. Some of the *vygies* are exported to the United States where they are sold to gardeners at five dollars apiece. Every cell of the *vygie* flower is in effect a

small optical apparatus reflecting the light like a mirror. Frank soon learnt to admire the spring flowers with the sun behind him for the flowers turn their faces to the sun all through the day.

The *koekmakranka* bears its white flowers in December but only the hawk moths reach the nectar. Frank waited until the first winter rains and then searched for the berries. So aromatic is the pulp that the strawberry aroma is strong enough to fill a room. Lagooners and many others steep the berries in brandy as a remedy for griping pains in the stomach. Ham-and-eggs (or butter-and-eggs) is a strange name for a flower. It is better known as the Ewa-Trewa (or “ever-trevor”), though this sounds even more mysterious. This waxy orange flower is a ground orchid and the name may be a corruption of

the Nederlands *geele trewa*. A large variety, the *rooi trewa*, grows on the Saldanha coast, with spikes of rosy flowers. Yes, the wild flowers have strange names. Frank was never able to trace the origin of the *pimpimpie*, an iris which appears with red flowers in August, yellow later. But the *kalossies*, he said, started as *klokkies*, little bells. Orange *kalossies* appear round the vleis in September. Near the coast you find the grey, brown and dark red forms of this iris. Late summer brings out the *vlak kamelle*, a shrub with bright orange flowers. The *kelkiewyn*, wine cup or “red, white and blue”, makes a fine show when it flowers in September in wet, clay soil not far from the ocean. Many wild flowers have been named after members of the Duckitt and Versfeld families who have done so much to

encourage flower shows and to protect the flowers.

Frank Wightman admired the spectacle of the flowers and after the smells of the city it was the fragrance of the spring that went deeper into his mind than the glow of colour. This is the real spell of the veld. Sometimes it is the honey aroma that comes to the nostrils; then the rich scent of heather or the sweetness of something that reminds you of honeysuckle. Here is true refreshment, mellow as good wine. Each different aroma stirs up memories of old, happy times. Here is harmony. The flowers talk to those who understand them and each flower has its own voice, its own personality. As a contrast there drifts from the lagoon cottages the odours of firewood, blue-gum from one, *renosterbos*

from another, mingling with the perfumes of the veld.

During a visit to a lagoon village, Frank and I heard the story of an old lagoonier who was buried at Church Haven. He loved the spring flowers and in his old age longed for each September so that he could see the veld ablaze once more. After one or two heart attacks his relatives thought that he ought not to go out alone; yet when September came again he sauntered away happily among the dunes. He did not come home that evening but they tracked him and found his body among the flowers, a daisy in his button-hole.

CHAPTER 10

SEAMARKS AND LANDMARKS

*The strongest man in the world is he
who stands most alone.*

HENDRIK IBSEN

CLIMB AGAIN to the summit of Constable Hill for a closer survey of the great bay and lagoon and the beaches where Frank Wightman found peace for so many years. Study the seamarks and landmarks and listen to the stories we heard and discovered over the years. The old Saldanha will rise before you.

Saldanha Bay has been called the finest harbour in Africa and the charts show that the old navigators found a true sanctuary there. Frank and I examined all the old charts in the Cape archives; a French “Carte de la baye de Saldana”; the later Dutch

zeekaarten; the chart made by Lieutenant Archdeacon R.N. and his bearded seaman a hundred years ago; and one surveyed by Commander James Dalglish in recent years. Dalglish’s meticulous work reveals in great detail all the features within the North and South Heads of Saldanha. Offshore are the sealing rocks.²¹ Close to the northern entrance is Malagas Island; and there the seas break on Long John Reef, named after some bygone mariner who left not a vestige of a legend. Was he a pirate? Saldanha reeks of adventure and fortunately it has not all vanished like Long John. South of Malagas is another bird haunt, Jutten Island where Frank landed and stood beside the graves of Dutch seamen drowned when the

²¹ See appendix: Sealing.

treasure ship *Meresteyn* was lost there nearly four hundred years ago.²² Third of the islands in the fairway is Marcus, a low flat rock, naked save for its flagstaff, huts, penguins and terns. Finally there are the lagoon islands, Meeuw and Schapen. At low tide you can almost reach Meeuw on foot.

You may see large oyster barges plying up and down the calm lagoon. On the lagoon floor there is a square mile of fossilised oyster shell, fifty million tons of oysters that died a million years ago. Why did they die? Perhaps there was a volcanic upheaval; or a freak tide left the rich bed exposed to the sun; or a river feeding the oysters with fresh water may have been diverted. Some tremendous event robbed primitive

man of his luscious meals. Now the hard shells are brought up and crushed for poultry food and half a century of dredging has made only a small hole in the huge oyster bed.

Saldanha Bay is a mystery and the lagoon has obviously seen enormous changes. The lagoon runs southwards for eight miles from Schapen Island. A western channel leads to the Dutch East India Company's settlement now known as Oude Post.²³ The long central channel always has one or two fathoms of water and this carried *Wylo* into Kraal Bay, where Hottentots left relics of their kraal. Dutch and other ships also followed an eastern channel to Oesterval, with its generous fresh water spring. Erskine Childers would have loved the tricky navigation

²² See appendix: *Meresteyn*.

²³ See appendix: *Oude Post*.

among the long banks that dry out at low tide; for here, too, there are riddles of the sands. And on the shore are the names that recall the wild life of long ago. Elephants drank at Olifantskuil, the buffalo at Buffelstein, the eland at Elandsfontein. Owls still prey on other birds and hiss at night round Uilenkraal; and no doubt there are tortoises in Skilpad Vallei. Ystervarken's Rug must have reminded some forgotten farmer of a porcupine's back. Other names are more difficult. Some were given because Hottentot chiefs lived there and Sonquasfontein was undoubtedly a spring where the Bushmen slaked their thirst. But what happened at Moordenaar's Bosch? And why was Bottelary on the shores of the lagoon known as the place for bottling? We saw no wine grapes there. No doubt outlaws lurked round

Drosters Klip. On the Kapokberg away to the south the wild rosemary shows its white flowers like snow. Under the Kapokberg are old farms with gables and neat black thatch, white homesteads with thick walls. Huguenots brought roses from France and planted them on these farms. Oaks are centuries old. Finches and turtledoves nest in the poplar groves. Near the coast are the cattle-runs and then the sand gives way to the wheat fields.

Under the dunes and the waters of Saldanha lie many romantic scraps of timber and metal, glass and stone, thrown up by the sea or left in the sand by men from far countries. Such relics arouse the imagination and hold out strong promise of further discoveries. As I walked over the veld and along the coast with Frank Wightman he

talked often of the buried remnants and oddities that he had chanced upon. Here was the past to feel and touch and sense, strong links with the old Saldanha.

As you know, Frank rowed across the lagoon week after week, year after year, from his anchorage in Kraal Bay to the little farm two miles away at Oesterval, where he bought his milk and eggs and vegetables. He soon became aware of a sunken vessel with only a vestige of old timber showing above the floor of the lagoon. Yet he knew the sandbanks and ripples could only have been caused by the obstruction of a wreck. Old men of the lagoon confirmed his discovery; they had known it all their lives. “Oude skip, ja - oude skip,” agreed a ninety-year-old lagooner. It does not appear on the chart for the lagoon is fairly

deep there and the wreck is no menace to navigation. But the old ship rests there, hidden in the sand, and Frank and I discovered the secret. Coastline and entrance to Saldanha are littered with wrecks of all periods but very few ships have been lost within the shelter of the bay. However, there were a few disasters. One was the *Bruydegom*, a clumsy ship which often used an anchorage to the south of Riet Bay marked on early charts as Bruydegom’s Hoek. (It is sad to record that this name has disappeared.) In spite of being hard to handle, the *Bruydegom* served Van Riebeeck and his successors for about twenty years before she struck a rock between the islands at the lagoon entrance.²⁴ According to the quartermaster, the sailor at the helm

²⁴ See appendix: Van Riebeeck, Jan.

was a careless fellow who ignored warnings, talked and laughed when he should have been avoiding danger. A heavy squall threw the *Bruydegom* on the rocks; and although the crew dumped the ballast they could not save her. She drifted into the calm lagoon and sank. And there she lies where Frank Wightman saw her bones. “*Oude skip, ja - oude skip.*” Old ship yes - old ship.

For centuries sailor men and others swigged their rum and wine on the shores of Saldanha, and careless or drunken ones threw away the hand-made bottles. I admired lovely old glassware Frank pointed out to me in lagoon cottages, glass with an old-fashioned bloom in it. Some bottles had flanged tops so that the wineskin could be fastened securely. Kraal Bay, where ships were careened, revealed

enough old Dutch bottles for a museum. There, too, Frank found a bowl with, a beautiful green glaze. Clay pipes with acorn-sized bowls and long stems lost there by sailors have been found in recent years. The loveliest relic Frank saw was a square bottle picked up towards the end of last century by a member of the Paulus family. It was heavily embossed, with enamel in the design, and the word “Cascaes” in Roman lettering. After many years on the mantelpiece of a lagoon cottage the bottle was sold for five shillings.

Oude Post is an historic spot where you would expect to find reminders of Saldanha’s earliest days.²⁵ Goat-herds have picked up cannon-balls and bullets. Above this settlement, on the

²⁵ See appendix: Lichtenstein, Dr. M.

hill called Postberg, sweating Dutch soldiers left a signal cannon more than six hundred feet above sea-level. On the hillside are old graves. Near the springs that supplied Dutch ships with good water there were once engraved “post office stones” similar to those carved by early mariners who called at Table Bay before the Dutch arrived. Are they still there, buried and forgotten? Frank and I searched in vain.

Among the most dramatic of Frank Wightman’s historic finds was a large flat slab of rock about the size of a tombstone with an engraving greatly worn. It might have been a gravestone, Frank said, or some other memorial or monument with armorial bearings. Even when he first saw it in 1940 the lettering had gone and only the outline of a shield remained. This relic was

unknown to the lagooners and Frank kept the secret for more than a quarter of a century. Then he sailed over to the site (close to high-water mark near the southern end of Kraal Bay) and showed the stone to Professor Eric Axelson, the historian, authority on the Portuguese navigators. They scrubbed off the weed and examined the stone carefully; but all the professor could say was that it was man-made. Grooves chipped out with some instrument could still be distinguished. Frank Wightman had a theory about this stone which is worth recording. Soon after Van Riebeeck arrived at the Cape he sent a board with the Company’s insignia to be planted on the northern shores of Saldanha. He also ordered his men to cut the VOC emblem on some large rock which could not be rolled away, and supplied

them with stone-cutters, chisels and hammers. No such relic has been found on the rocks of Saldanha. Governor Bax renewed the Company's "old and lawful possession" of Saldanha in the sixteen seventies by sending a ship with engraved stones to be erected at various points. The arms of the Netherlands and the VOC mark were cut into these blue stones. One stone was knocked down by an elephant so cement and lime were sent for repair work. Was it one of these stones Frank discovered? If only he had sought expert help at the time of his discovery the mystery might have been solved. I am afraid it is too late now. Frank told me that he kept his discovery secret because he thought something might be published that would bring crowds of people to Kraal Bay.

Frank agreed with me that Saldanha Bay was at its best when it was only a fishing harbour. Hoedjies Bay had a charming and comfortable oldfashioned hotel. Granite and limestone quarries supplied material for some of Cape Town's largest buildings; but the village retained its nineteenth-century atmosphere until World War II brought the armed forces into this forgotten corner of crawfish and snoek, guitars and the Saturday bioscope piano. Now the gardens of Hoedjies Bay are watered from the Berg River pipeline; large naval and military establishments have arisen on the veld; there are villas with electric light instead of candles and thatch. Fortunately there are still parts of this great harbour where you may imagine that you are back in the days of sail -

but only when the jet aircraft are grounded.

Saldanha hides many buried and forgotten remnants, as I have said, and it has had a fair share of unexplained human bones. When the railway line at Hoedjies Bay was brought to the harbour during World War II the labourers dug up fifty skeletons. This was not a known graveyard. Frank thought they might have been the bones of men who came in with a scurvy-ridden ship or possibly they were plague victims. Clearly they had not been killed in battle. Towards the end of World War II more skeletons were found, well-preserved in the chalky soil at Hoedjies Point. Brass uniform buttons and other clues, proved that those men had been sailors. I traced them. They were men who had died during the guano rush in

the middle of last century. Most dramatic find of all was a much older grave with two skeletons. They had plaques round their necks, ornamental badges of rank identifying them as French officers. Their swords had been buried with them. It is possible that both men had died as a result of a duel.

Such are the Saldanha ghosts.. Frank and I unrolled the Saldanha records and pieced together many pages of the Saldanha story. Saldanha has seen many fleets, many queer little ships, but the fishing craft remain while others come and go. Van Riebeeck noted “a supply of fresh fish from Saldanha better in flavour and more delicate than in the Mother Country”. They were mainly harders and steenbras, while sharks were caught for their skins. April brings the snoek,

the fish loved by all coloured fishermen. Frank met old hands at Saldanha who talked of the days when one man could haul in two hundred, even three hundred snoek in a great day's fishing. They needed enormous catches when a snoek fetched only two pence on the wharf. However, there is a certain element of excitement in snoeking which is missing when a crawfish net is hauled up. The professional fisherman would rather catch snoek than the more profitable crawfish. And he would prefer a meal of *mootjies*, those delicious slices of dried snoek, to a dish of the other fish that swarm in Saldanha Bay, mackerel, maasbankers and harders.

Flying boats helped to guard Saldanha during World War II, and fleets of merchantmen found sanctuary there when Table Bay was overcrowded.

Boom defence nets were thrown across the inner entrances. On one day in March 1943 there were twenty-four ocean-going vessels in the bay. They called it the "North Bay" then for reasons of secrecy, that old and secure harbour so heavy with its long story of adventure.

Gaze southwards from the South Head of Saldanha, past Kreefte Baai where the crawfish boats anchor in the kelp, past Vondeling Island and Black Rock, and you come to the unbroken beach that Frank Wightman called Sixteen-Mile Beach. It is sixteen miles to Ysterfontein seaside resort, sixteen miles with hardly a sign of civilisation unless you climb the high dunes that

fringe the beach and search the veld for a distant farmhouse or windmill.²⁶

On this lonely beach there was always driftwood, whitened by sea and sand, often splintered, occasionally so perfect that Frank carried it back to his boat and turned it into something useful. Always there were fish baskets, choice shells, jawbones and claws and beaks of sea creatures. When heavy seas came in from an unusual quarter the whole contour of the beach was altered and weird, buried relics came back to the sunlight. One such gale uncovered the after part of a wooden ship. Frank made out the curves of the stern at half-tide but never again did he glimpse that vision of disaster. He gave me the position, about five miles south of Vondeling. After a hard

northerly had blown for days, followed by a southerly that combed the sand, Frank found a George III shilling. Perhaps the shilling was a link with the wreck and her drowned company. There was a sword, too, with a grip like dull ivory and silver filigree work on the guard; but most of the steel blade rusted away. Another day there was the unmistakable notched steering oar of a jangada, the Brazilian fishing craft with lateen sails. Balsa logs from the Amazon sometimes reached this beach. Here, too, were the glass balls used as net floats by distant fishermen. Another unexpected gift from Brazil was a fish harpoon, the bamboo shaft covered with carvings. This flotsam took Frank back to the years he had spent on the coast of Brazil and his own landfalls

²⁶ See appendix: Ysterfontein.

years afterwards when he sailed there in his little yawl.

Frank picked up one piece of wood that looked like oak. Only after he had started work on it, fashioning cockpit beakings, did he discover that it was hickory. When these two woods are weathered it is hard to tell the difference. Frank sandpapered it to a splendid fineness and smothered it with thick oil. It was a lovely effect, the hickory weathered to silver after its long cruise across the South Atlantic to land on Sixteen Mile Beach.

Frank discovered live flotsam on that long beach. One day, far off in the spume-laden air, he sighted the small, upright figure of a penguin standing alone above high-water mark. It seemed tame and frightened, smothered with oil. But when he

picked up the penguin the sharp beak ripped open the back of his hand. He wrapped the penguin in his shirt to prevent another swift assault and carried it back to the yacht. Then wearing heavy gloves, he cleaned the bird with cotton waste and turpentine. The penguin swam away, its powers restored. Penguins have lived in these waters ever since they came up from the Antarctic long ages ago. Usually they are amusing, even the storm-tossed penguins tottering up Sixteen Mile Beach when the grey seas have flung them ashore. "Like drunken old men in dinner jackets trying to get their buttons done up," Frank remarked. "They are so tame with confusion that you can touch them."

Sixteen Mile Beach is like the world before man appeared. Here the sea beats with the thunder heard before



“Gaze southwards from the South Head of Saldanha and you come to the unbroken beach that Frank Wightman called Sixteen-Mile Beach. On this lonely beach there was always driftwood whitened by sea and sand.

man started his pitiful little journey down the ages. Here the wind thrusts up from the Antarctic so laden with ozone that it is like breathing pure oxygen. Under your feet is the sea wrack that has drifted for months or years across the oceans. Here Frank spent nights in his sleeping-bag, waking to the enchantment of another dawn, the growl of the surf and then the exhilarating smack of cold water on his naked body as he raced into the sea. He said the beach and the veld were uninhabited as the moon, save for the animals. He walked with his clothes over his arm. A sandwich of homemade bread, cheese and a handful of salted nuts kept him going all day, and when he was thirsty he went to the springs where the buck drink.

Lovers of wildflowers and anglers know Ysterfontein with its black rocks and sandy cove. Dutch skippers anchored in the tiny harbour early in the eighteenth century to load cargoes of the finest salt in the Cape districts. Many small craft have found shelter behind Ysterfontein Point, a round point with a hump nearly three hundred feet high. But when the swell runs to the north of west then it is time to haul up the anchor and make for open sea. Frank had often sailed through the five-mile channel between Dassen Island and Ysterfontein and always he remembered the mariners who came here in days of old. Dassen provided them with seal-meat and penguin eggs and more of those English rabbits which survive in South Africa only on the bird islands. Ysterfontein farm was one of the

Dutch East India Company's cattle runs. They found a spring there with rusty-coloured water tasting not unpleasantly of iron, hence the name. All the old maps and charts show the place as Yzerfontein. Starrenburgh, Martin Mecklenburgh, Henning Huysing, Hendrik Oostwald Eksteen and other wealthy meat contractors knew the spring, the salt pans and the grazing between Groene Kloof and Saldanha. Forty farms, each of three thousand morgen, were named and leased to the cattle barons when the Cape settlement was only half a century old. Yzerfontein and many farms in the district still bear their original names: Palmietfontein, Carnemelksfontein, Cruywagenspost and so on. Cattle that drank at the "iron spring" near the coast were driven south with other herds to be

slaughtered for the people in the Company's ships and the barracks, hospital and slave quarters on shore. Salt from Kompagniespan, Swartwater, Burgerspan and other sources was taken to the outpost at Groene Kloof (now Mamre) and sent to the Cape by wagon; but the Yzerfontein salt pan was so close to the sea that it was more convenient to load the salt into little sloops and galliots which covered the forty miles to Table Bay under sail. That coastal sea trade went on for more than two centuries, until the sand tracks became roads.

Bushman and Strandlopers drank at the "iron fountain" many centuries before the first sail appeared on the horizon. Ysterfontein and the beaches to the north and south of the point have yielded the usual shell middens



“Sixteen-Mile Beach is like the world before man appeared. Here the sea beats with the thunder heard before man started his pitiful little journey down the ages.” (The author in foreground.)

and, as I have said, Frank discovered skulls and stone implements. At one site an old Dutch gin bottle was found among the bone arrowheads and pottery, evidently a prized and wonderful possession among a people who had never seen glass. A much older inhabitant of this coast was the buffalo of an extinct species found near Ysterfontein some years ago. Hottentots also camped round the spring, raided the Dutch cattle occasionally, and drove their own cattle down the coast past Ysterfontein to barter with the Company's officials at the Castle.

Anglers call the rocks of Ysterfontein by local names such as Draaihoek and Skaap Eiland. There they haul in the galjoen and hottentot and net the crawfish in the pools. Frank found a specimen of the queer boxfish species

on the sands, and carried off this grotesque creature to test its value as a barometer. A boxfish is like a fish in a box, the skin forming the box, the armour of hexagonal bony plates being the scales. Some species are covered with thorny growths. There are openings in the box for the mouth, eyes and gill slits. Once this fish was collected for royal curio cabinets. Very little has been learnt about it since Columbus described it as "like a swine, with a very hard skin, no part whereof was soft but the tail." At one time it was thought that the boxfish could fill vacant spaces with water, like a submarine; but when Dr. K. H. Barnard dissected one he found the projecting sides were filled with jelly. This substance prevented the body of the fish from rattling about inside its box. Along the west coast of the Cape

the box fish is known as the *seevarkie*. Frank saw it hanging from ceilings at Ysterfontein, pointing its ugly snout in the direction where the weather is taking shape; to the north-west for rain and storm, to the south-west for wind. Some people informed Frank that the *seevarkie* was a wizard. Frank preferred his barometer.

Now and again Frank Wightman found lumps of pumice on Sixteen Mile Beach. A geologist told him that abundant grey pumice had first been reported there some time after the Krakatoa eruption of 1883, the greatest blast in the history of the world. Dust from the volcano covered most of the globe and the shock wave raced across the Indian Ocean and was still one foot high when it reached the Cape coast. Sometime later came the spongy lava, swept westwards by the

Agulhas current and then northwards to Ysterfontein and Saldanha by the Benguella current. Pumice has occurred so often since the Krakatoa explosion that geologists now suspect a new source. They have analysed more recent deposits and found the chemical composition different from the Krakatoa pumice. So it appears there is a submarine volcano, probably in the Indian Ocean, sending out pumice at intervals of years. Frank had samples of this pumice in the cabin of *Wyllo*, part of his beachcomber's museum.

Ysterfontein is indeed a village of the South Atlantic, and almost every home has its tales and romantic relics of the sea. A diver showed Frank a large brass lamp from one of the ships lost on Boom Point at Dassen Island. It had been under water for many years,

but they found oil in the reservoir; it was polished and restored and Frank saw it burning brightly.

Dassen Island, the scene of Frank Wightman's accident, held many happier memories for him. There is an anchorage called House Bay at the northern end and there Frank often found shelter in hard south-east gales. He took *Wylo* in there during his passages between the lagoon and Table Bay. Antonio d'Almeida, the dark, good-natured headman of Portuguese descent, always made Frank welcome and gave him penguin eggs.

Three generations of d'Almeidas had guarded the penguins of Dassen. Like his forbears, Antonio had come to know a great deal about penguins; and Frank, the inquiring naturalist, listened

with interest. Dassen, of course, is known by repute to all the world's ornithologists. Some of them have called there to study the penguin kingdom, one of the sensational spectacles of the bird world, with about eighty thousand black-footed or Cape jackass penguins living in burrows. They are there because the icy, fish-laden Benguella current sweeps past the island and feeds them magnificently; ten ounces or more of fish every second day for every penguin that enters the water.

Frank Wightman passed day after day staring at the penguins on the beaches and in the rock pools. He thought they were the most lovable of all birds and also very mysterious. When he approached their burrows the females crouched down over their eggs and rolled their heads, watching him

closely. They brayed like donkeys and grunted and sometimes they rushed at him and attacked his legs. But when they were not menaced they were gentle and playful and more human than monkeys. Frank watched them leaping out of the water like tiny porpoises. Not only would they dive into the pools but they would swim below the water, work up to top speed with flippers beating strongly and then come shooting up like rockets to land on a chosen rock with expert judgment. They had their games on the sand, flipping their neighbours and rushing away. Often they climbed the smooth rocks and came down the slopes as living toboggans. Sometimes they were clockwork toys, often they looked absurd, but always Frank saw them as splendid creatures of the sea. Questions arose in his mind and went

unanswered until a visit to the island when he found a Norwegian ornithologist staying with Tony d'Almeida and studying the penguins. This man Hansen was a blue-eyed, fair man, not much taller than Frank. Hansen talked learnedly with the Scandinavian lilt. He had been down south with the whalers and knew most of the seventeen penguin species, from the huge emperors four feet high with orange necks to these little black and white jackasses weighing only six pounds. Hansen was friendly. He answered some of Frank's questions and they discussed the mysteries.

Frank wanted to know whether the penguins were birds that had once flown and then lost the power and become the most aquatic of all birds. Or were they still on the way up to the time, many millions of years hence,

when they would take to the air. Had they flown in the world before the glaciers, eating the foods of the land until ice covered the earth and they had been forced to discover new diets in the southern ocean? Hansen said the oldest fossil penguins, fifty or a hundred million years old, did not suggest a bird with a flying structure. But he did not care to be dogmatic. He thought the penguins were like the whales and the seals, land animals that had taken to the sea.

How did the penguins navigate? Frank had encountered them far out at sea, penguins on feeding voyages. They stayed away from their islands and lived on their fat for weeks. Tony d'Almeida had told him of stray rockhopper penguins that had swum for a thousand or fifteen hundred miles from the sub-Antarctic islands to the

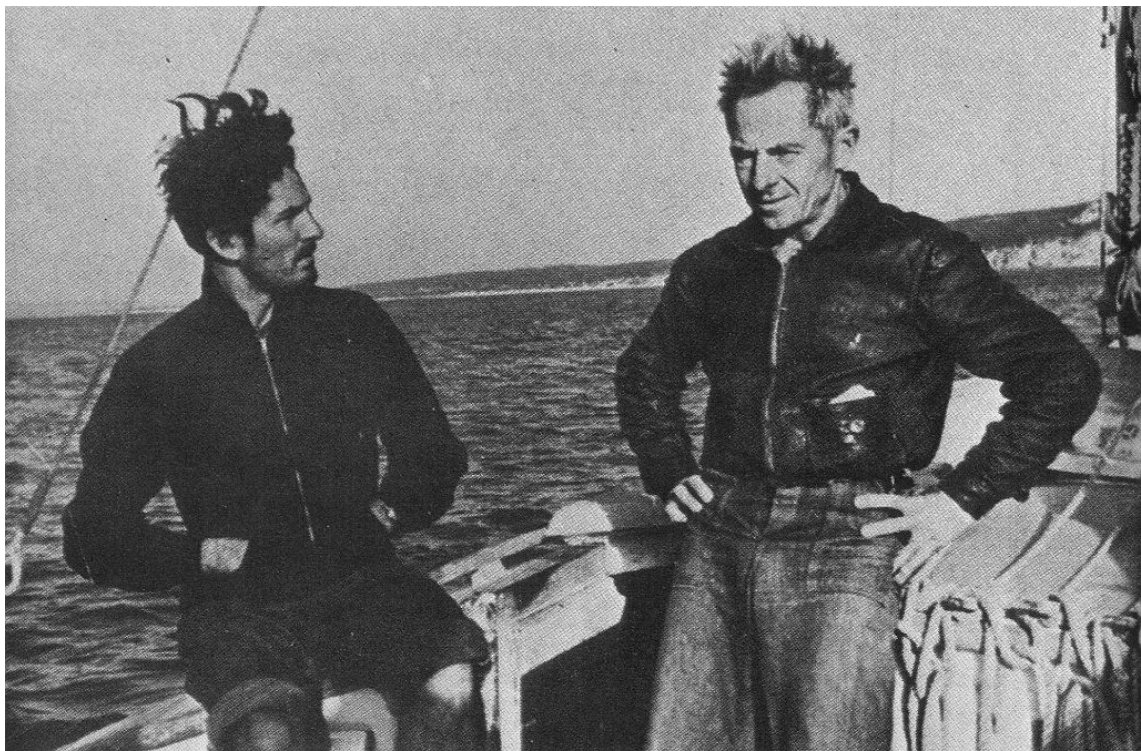
Cape coast. Hansen had often pondered over this problem. He pointed out that penguins had spread from the south ice to the equator, every species finding the exact habitat it needed for survival. Each bird must have a clock and compass built into the brain; but it would still need clear weather and a proper view of the sun to keep on course. Hansen said the homing instinct in the penguin was a mystery still. During a long voyage across open sea the penguin received bearings that could not be explained by sun compass orientation.

So the scientist Hansen and the observant Frank Wightman watched the birds together. There were times when Tony d'Almeida accompanied them and proved that he knew more about certain aspects of penguin life than the museum man. The headman

led them to a bay where large shoals of fish were often to be seen. It was a bottle-neck bay, a perfect trap, and hungry sharks drove the fish in there and devoured them. Unsuspecting penguins entered the water and never returned to their burrows. Once a coloured labourer had started to swim across the bay for a bet, a packet of cigarettes. The sharks got him. Tony d'Almeida pointed out other enemies of the vulnerable penguins. Giant petrels, terrors of the southern seas, eight feet from wingtip to wingtip, preyed on chicks and fully-grown moulting penguins; no wonder seamen called the brown scavengers "leopard birds" and "sea devils". Many penguins carried the scars of escapes, torn flippers and webs, and some hopped about with a foot missing. Seals were a constant danger. On

shore a number of wildcats, descendants of pets of the lighthouse keepers, were led by a ferocious tom. They had become accustomed to fending for themselves and had reverted to savagery. Mature penguins were able to defend themselves vigorously with beaks like daggers. Penguin chicks were torn to pieces by the cats.

Frank Wightman, a lifelong and devoted swimmer, never tired of studying the penguins in the water. Streamlined like torpedoes, tough skins impregnated with oil, covered with short overlapping plumage, these birds were able to resist the intense cold and hunt tirelessly below the surface. Were they flying down there or swimming? Frank decided they were swimming, their webbed feet held close save when they turned.



“Sixteen-Mile Beach is like the world before man appeared. Here the sea beats with the thunder heard before man started his pitiful little journey down the ages.” (The author in foreground.)

They used their flippers in unison, beating downwards with these strong natural paddles. The tremendous drive seemed to come from the shoulder-blades, solid bones reaching far down the back. Frank marvelled at the agility of this strange bird, not only when submerged but on shore. Penguins sometimes look awkward and often they walk like drunken sailors; yet they have inspired poems, a memorable novel and a ballet.

Hansen found the Dassen Island penguins were not pure fish-eaters. He listed the diet: the floating plant and animal life called plankton, the krill eaten by the whales, small crawfish and squid. Hansen took pictures of the penguins cooling themselves in the wind with flippers raised and he saw how they loved their shady burrows. He listened attentively to their raucous

courtships, noted the postures and displays so different from all other birds. Hansen and Wightman stared at the penguins and went away wondering. Another of Frank Wightman's visions of the world of island birds came four years after his return from the United States. His shipmate Graham Young arrived on a visit, making films for television. Young and a partner, the author-photographer T. V. Bulpin, decided to take their cameras to Malagas Island, a huge gannet colony. Every day Frank ferried them across in *Wylo* from Langebaan to the low, boulder strewn island. On the nesting areas there were about forty thousand handsome white birds. It was the breeding season. Naked chicks and older birds with downy feathers awaited the coming of the parents with half-digested fish.

These gannets have a wide range, from West Africa to Zanzibar; but their homes are on Malagas and other isles in Cape waters and they return to the same nests year after year.

So the film cameras captured the head-wagging and preening of courtship; the incubating birds with eggs under their webbed feet; the expert, unerring dives after fish. Frank remembered their deafening cries, too, while the emotional birds alighted on their cup-shaped nests. Carra ... carra ... carra !

Yes, they were beautiful. Yet the bird Frank admired was that little ocean sailor, the penguin. On the islands he watched the black-backed gulls circling with melancholy calls. He saw the reed cormorants with their; seaweed nests on rock ledges, the white-breasted cormorants, the oyster-catchers and herons. The gannets were

the greatest flyers and on the sea they floated like ducks. But the penguins put on a different show every day. They had their criminals in penguin slums, their nest-robbers, their pompous citizens, their comedians. Frank Wightman regarded the penguins as his friends.

CHAPTER 11

THE LAGOONERS

*Now the aim of all solitude, I take it, is
the same;
to live more at leisure and at one's
ease.*

MONTAIGNE

SEAMEN OF many nations found sanctuary on the shores of Saldanha and the lagoon. Even in the bone-dry months when the southerlies whip up the water this land-locked bay must have offered peace and rest after hard years under sail; and they found that it held for them the charm that Frank Wightman discovered. Of course they are all sandtrappers now, walking with the peculiar shuffling gait that belongs to the sandveld and the coastal dune country. They speak Afrikaans and English and most of them know only a few words and phrases of other

languages brought to the lagoon by seafaring ancestors. The lagooners have merged into a type, a most unusual blend in a strange corner of the world of sand.

Langebaan, the lagoon "capital", stands on the farm Stomphehoek or Geitenmelksfontein, owned by Dirk Slabber early last century. The old single-storied hotel building bears the date 1842 and was probably the farmhouse. But the founder of the village was William Thomas Smith, an English seaman. Smith's descendants told Frank Wightman that he built himself a reed hut on the beach in the middle of last century and made a living as a fisherman. The first church came in the eighteen-sixties. Marra, an Italian who deserted from a sailing-ship and became a prosperous store-keeper, arrived before the end of last

century. On the far side of the lagoon other sea-weary men found wives and put up thatched cottages. One was an American, George Albert Lloyd.²⁷ He joined a Frenchman named De Montfort who was catching fish and trekking round the countryside with an ox-wagon selling the salted and smoked harders and marsbankers. That was in the eighteen sixties, and the Lloyds and De Montforts are still fishing. Here, too, are the Barsbys whose ancestors came from Devon, the Meyers from St. Helena, the Caswells from France, the Wilseners from Holland. Norwegian whaler men also mingled with the lagoon people, so that today you have a little race unlike any other South African clan. Only on the sand dunes of Saldanha could

these lagooners of seafaring stock have arisen. It sounds idyllic but Frank knew that the old lagooners did not lead easy lives. Nowadays some of them have comfortable villas and motor-cars; unromantic and ugly forms of progress are there among the relics of wrecks, the black thatch and white-washed cottages. When the lagooners built these cottages there were only wagon-tracks round the bay. Some of them remained in isolation until after World War II; and Frank often wished that the motor-roads had never been made.

Frank took me to see a lagoonier who lived to ninety-four and could still read the Bible by candle-light without spectacles. This man told us that when the lagoon people needed money badly in the old days they would haul their nets and walk to Darling with the

²⁷ See appendix: Lloyd, George Albert.

catch. That was nearly thirty miles each way. He and his brother tramped across the dunes, their heavy load slung from a pole over their shoulders. They sold the fish at a penny apiece. Schryver's Hoek, Boereplein, Church Haven, Bossieskraal and Stoffbergsfontein are the lagoon fishing settlements on the western shore. Not one is large enough to be called a village, and there are cottages which stand alone. Bossieskraal has the best water on the western shore of the lagoon, a spring without a trace of the usual brack flavour, the right sort of water for washing clothes easily.

Picturesque corners survive on the lagoon. John Ruskin the English author and poet, once declared that the laws governing the art of architecture were sacrifice, truth, power, beauty, life, memory and obedience. He also

remarked that the only real contribution to architecture for several centuries had been made by the Dutch at the Cape. Probably he was referring to the large homesteads of Constantia and other old settled districts; but Ruskin would also have found pleasure in the lagoon cottages with their massive end chimneys. So large were these hearths, indeed, that one lagoon family was able to use an open hearth as a kitchen. Mr. James Walton, the architectural writer, pointed out that the lagoon fishermen's cottages had much in common with the regional building types of Arniston and Hotagterklip. Their peculiarity lies in the method of constructing the front wall. Rear walls, end walls and chimney-stacks are of stone, but in front a framework of wall-posts was filled in with reeds and

mud. Walton traced the method back to the homes of the earliest settlers.

When the lagooners are ill they have to think deeply before sending to Darling for the doctor. It costs more than most of them earn in a week. Of course they have their own remedies; and some of the knowing ones are always gathering herbs and brewing medicines. They wrap their sick children in the skins of freshly-killed sheep; they rely on portions of dogs and fowls, frogs and tortoises that were used by doctors in the middle ages. Brandy is given for snake-bite or the sting of a scorpion. Any educated person is regarded as a medical authority. Frank Wightman was once tackled by a man who had been passing stones. He would not go to the doctor in Darling because he was afraid of being sent to hospital. Frank

explained that he was not a doctor, but the man exclaimed: “Maar jy is baie opgevoed - wag, ek sal vir jou wys.” (But you are fully educated - wait, I’ll show you). He darted into his cottage and rushed back with a chamber full of specimens. Groping with his fingers he extracted a large stone and tried to drop it into Frank’s unwilling hand.

Lagooners told Frank they were terrified of hospitals but they share that attitude with many less isolated people. Some benefit from the easy tempo and peace of the lagoon; others bring on ailments by too much brandy and *vaaljapie*, unhealthy diets, heavy clothes and closed windows. Some know instinctively how to live. George Albert Lloyd, founder of Church Haven, reached seventy-five, his widow was ninety and several of their children died in their eighties. Two of

the Meyer brothers passed ninety. One family of German descent, Paulus and his four sisters, were very old people who lived in a solitary, low thatched cottage among gnarled trees and cultivated a tiny patch of land on a moist dune. Year after year they drew their old-age pensions and ate their fresh fish and vegetables. Paulus collected timber on the sea beach while other lagooners bought firewood when the wagon came from Darling. Paulus also mended shoes and charged five shillings for new soles and heels. In the end only one sister was left. When she was ninety-one and almost blind she sold the property. Frank noticed some good furniture in that cottage.

Funerals are held at Church Haven, where the western lagooners have their graveyard. After the funeral comes a

ceremony not unlike an Irish wake. One family arranged for the body of a relative, killed on the Antarctic whaling grounds, to be brought back to Church Haven for burial. Weddings are occasions for the capers known on farms as “sheepskin dances” because they are held in the shearing-shed. Concertina and guitar music goes on until dawn with few intervals but with many rounds of *vaaljapie* and brandy. You remember the candle light, the *vastrap* music, the supper of *kop-en-pootjies* (head and trotters) or *bloedwors*, the black pudding made from the blood of a pig. Frank told me he was still dizzy in the morning as he staggered along the beach to Kraal Bay. Not long afterwards there was a funeral but he left before refreshments were served. “You were clever not to come,” a lagoonier said to him a few

days later. “It was worse than the wedding.”

Here on the lagoon beaches are the last of the open Cape fishing-boats, old-fashioned and heavy, depending on their oars or their large spritsails and jibs. Some are twenty or even twenty-five feet overall, with a beam of six or seven feet. The oars are almost the length of the boat. In these stout craft the lagooners used to sail forty miles offshore during the snoek season.

When they return to their own beach the boats are lifted with the aid of heavy poles and slings and sixteen men carry a boat above high water mark. You need a strong heart for such an effort, and the unfair strain has broken young fishermen. These boats sail well considering their shallow draught. Note the joyous red water-

line markings curving upwards like waves breaking under the bows. They sail back with harders and *marsbankers* that are transformed every year into tons of *bokkoms*.²⁸ The air of the lagoon is laden with the odour of *bokkoms* drying on the wooden frameworks called *stellasies* after being pickled in strong brine. From the cottages at times there drifts the aroma of smoked *bokkoms*; and the greatest flavour of all comes when you taste *bokkoms* straight from the gridiron.

Lagoon fishing depends on the sea grass that grows on the sandbanks, the grass that holds the spawn of the harders and *marsbankers*. After a gale of wind some of this grass drifts ashore and is gathered for the agar-

²⁸ See appendix: Bokkoms.

agar; and this is turned into gelatine. Fishermen hate to see the valuable seaweed raked off the sandbanks, for they believe that the whole character and fertility of the lagoon fishing will be lost if the grass disappears. Seaweed also provides them with the "red ribbons" which makes an unusual jam or jelly. Crawfish prefer the colder waters outside the bay, and so the lagooners have to trudge across the peninsula with their nets before they can make their favourite *kreef* dishes. But they have other fish in the lagoon apart from the *bokkom* varieties; dassies and steenbras, red roman and kabeljou. Often at low water a large mussel bank can be reached in the middle of the lagoon, and the splendid perlemoen (abalone) also flourishes there. When the whaling stations 'were at work great shoals of mackerel

entered the bay; they fed on the offal of the slipways and were netted by the thousand. For years, long after World War II, a mackerel fetched three pence on the beach.

Sheep owned by the lagooners seem to graze mainly on sand and stones in summer. Yet one sheep will yield enough delicious cooking fat to fill a four-gallon paraffin tin; rich fat, sold on the lagoon at the price of a mackerel, three pence a pound. Frank spread his bread with it, cooked his eggs and fish in it, greased his wire rigging with it. Two exquisite dishes which Frank never touched on principle were breast of flamingo and tortoise. Flamingos have been protected for many years but they are still shot occasionally. Now and again he would notice the lovely feathers in a cottage kitchen and he warned the

people that he would report to the police if the shooting went on. "Dey werry goot eetin, mister," was the invariable reply, and this is true. Frank never went to the police. But the tortoise feasts maddened him. He came upon shepherds, and certain others who should have known better, cooking tortoises alive. They built a fire on the veld, turned them over so that they were helpless, and watched them squirming oddly in the flames. Whenever Frank encountered that torture he stopped it.

Ostrich eggs are among the lagoon dishes and when an ostrich is shot the unappetising biltong is eaten. In the spring there is superb honey. Frank used to visit a lagooner who had a number of hives and sometimes he found him covered with bees, "like a crumbed chop". For a long time he

sold his wild honey at two shillings per quart wine bottle full. Frank once bought a four-gallon tin of honey for thirty shillings, comb and all, and it lasted him for months. When he was pinned down on board his yacht for days by heavy weather he ate all the food in his locker and then lived on honey until he could go shopping again.

Yes, the lagoon people of strangely-mixed descent have known many hard years but there are times when they live well. Frank praised the fish rissoles and meat balls made by one housewife, and she replied: "Yes, I put a lot of things in - cloves and cinnamon and other things." They serve *brood kluitjies* with soups and stews, little bread dumplings that are excellent with stewed chicken. From the head, trotters and paunch of a

sheep they make a *hoofkaas* or brawn which is first class. A really fine lagoon fish dish consists of cold boiled fish cooked in the oven in a buttered pie-dish with layers of onions, spices, oil and vinegar. Such a course might be followed by *souskluitjies*, sweetened dumplings with cinnamon and butter sauce; or *melk-snyssels*, cuttings of dough rather like macaroni; or *boer pastei*, mince-pies; or highly-spiced *soetkoekies* with coffee. Every old lagoon cottage has the traditional *bakoond*, the country oven of rounded clay built into the kitchen and projecting from that end of the building: The fire is made inside and tended until the red coals are exactly right for baking. (If you count up to eleven before it becomes too hot for your hand inside the oven, then the temperature is correct; if the heat

becomes too great you throw salt into the oven.) Then the pans of *boeremeel* go in and the oven is sealed with clay.

Frank observed an austere regime in his own catering. In mid-winter he bought a fifty-pound bag of wheat at Oesterval, price twelve shillings and sixpence. He put it through the coffee-grinder and made the famous whole-meal bread I have mentioned, the bread that kept Skipper Harry Pidgeon going when he sailed alone round the world. He used fermented potato peels. "The secret lies in kneading the dough until it no longer sticks to your fingers," Frank explained. "Then you put it in a warm place for several hours until it swells up. Place it in a fully-heated oven and you can tell when it is ready by the aroma in the cabin." He also made wheaten porridge with a flavour of almonds

and walnuts; a porridge he had last tasted in his childhood in a tiny Scottish village. He put wheat in his vegetable stews instead of split peas. His favourite sandwich was made with home-made bread and butter, grated onion and sweetmilk cheese. Sometimes he spread the bread with olive oil, crushed a clove of garlic, and peppered it. "It is a sandwich which makes the fabled American sandwich seem tasteless," he remarked. "Strange how the simple things of life commend themselves as one grows older."

Fish often seek the shade like human beings, and often the yacht in Kraal Bay was surrounded by thousands of harders and marsbankers. In the evening light it seemed that a silver broth veiled the floor of the lagoon. All faced the same way, blunt heads

with quivering tails. Frank said they sometimes remained there for days on end, finding sanctuary not only from the sun but from plunging, greedy birds. Beneath the ebbing water stained amber by the dying sun these tiny lives were busy with mysterious compulsions beyond human understanding. "What do I know of the raptures and forebodings of my world of little fish?" Frank asked me this question as he peered into the green-lit lagoon, that unknown world quick with sudden death. It was a mosaic of fish, the smallest near the surface, inch-long fish like shreds of silver paper. Below them were little pilchards, silver over a dusting of blue; and still lower were large harders.

Then the birds arrived. The bay became black with ravenous duikers swimming shoulder to shoulder, each

bird scooping up several fish at a time with breathless grunts. Their hideous, scrawny throats bulged and slackened as the wriggling fish went down. Frank stood on deck waving a towel and shouting to keep the winged appetites from his sanctuary for fish. At times the fish shoals entered Kraal Bay after an attack by seabirds. These were the survivors, bearing fearful wounds. Some had escaped because they were too large for even a full-grown cormorant to tackle. They rested beneath the yacht and Frank watched them for days. Some he could identify by their wounds. They seemed to be recovering.

Frank could have cut down his food bill appreciably if he had been a fisherman but he shrank from this harmless occupation. During a lean period, however, he dropped a line

over the side and brought in a harder fifteen inches long. It went straight into the frying-pan. "Certainly delicious, but a huge meal for me," Frank commented. "I feel a louse. For years Wylo has been - to them - the most harmless thing on the lagoon. The question is whether one is ever justified in killing. I have never believed in killing, so I expect to reap my reward somewhere. I have proved to the underwater denizens that I am a killer. The account may be settled next time I go over the side. Man carries a mysterious legacy from his murderous ancestors, but if you have never killed you might give out a different aura. Some ocean monster hounding on a scent might hesitate. I wonder."

Needle-fish breed in the Langebaan lagoon but so seldom are they caught that they are regarded by the lagooners

as rarities. These swift killers, up to two feet long, prey on small fry in those waters, and they are eaten in turn by tunny and other large pelagic fish. The long lower jaw projects like a needle. Over short distances they can travel at two hundred feet a second, shooting clear of the water occasionally like flying fish. Most of them are so slender that they slip through all but the finest nets. However, a needle-fish becomes a great delicacy when it does reach a lagoon kitchen.

If you see anyone swimming in the lagoon you may be fairly sure he is a stranger. These warm channels with sand and seaweed underfoot do not lure the lagooners into the water. One day I watched Frank tearing into a deep pool off Bossieskraal, revelling in the feel of it before I drove him to the city. "Strong hey? He's seventy

hey?" remarked the storekeeper. "But it's dangerous, man - he'll ketch a cold for sure."

From the heights of Constable Hill one day Frank saw a rare spectacle, a lone man-eating shark cruising round Kraal Bay, nosing *Wylo* at anchor there. As a rule the man-eaters went no further than the whaling stations, where monsters gathered to gouge out pieces of meat from the dead whales. Sharks love the blood-stained waters of Donkergat but seldom indeed do they venture into the shallows. However, the Bossieskraal fishermen bring in an eight-footer occasionally. Frank saw a *vaalhaai* on the beach there, belly ripped open, the gigantic liver exposed, soon to be rendered down for oil. "Ja, in the lagoon we got it," remarked a fisherman savagely. "Las night, jus by yoor place. Look what

the barstud done to our nets.” This was an old and familiar nuisance and generations of lagooners have cursed the sharks that have bitten holes in the nets to feast on the harders inside. Yet sharks are sometimes welcome in the bay and lagoon waters. Van Riebeeck’s yacht Goede Hoop caught fifty sharks and prepared the skins for sale in Japan. Three centuries later the lagoon boats net large and small members of the shark family (such as dogfish) for oil and fertiliser.

CHAPTER 12

UNDER THE WHITE DUNES

*It is in solitude that great principles
are first understood and adopted.*

SIR RICHARD MALTRAVERS

SALDANHA BAY is one of those rare places where not only relics of our own few centuries have been preserved but also fragments of the far distant past. Now and again the glaring white sands moved aside and Frank Wightman found himself staring into some remote corner of man's early days. Scientists from many parts of the world have come to these dunes to examine some of the richest fossil deposits ever uncovered. Here they have been able to write fresh pages in the book of archaeology. Here are stone implements and the adornments of primitive man, bones of the extinct

animals he ate, his shellfish middens on the shore. Here a skull was revealed, hard as marble, which has thrown one more tiny beam of light on the profound mystery of the emergence of man. It is the high mineral content in these shelly dunes of great antiquity which has provided the right conditions for the fossilisation of bone. Little digging is necessary for the south-east gales winnow the sand more effectively than any machinery and bring the past to life.

Discoverer of this Stone Age paradise was Frank Wightman. He searched the sands of Saldanha and gathered arrow-heads and rubbing stones years before the first professor came upon the scene. He had prowled among the Inca ruins in South America during his cable days and he realised at once that

at Saldanha he had stumbled upon cultures not one thousand years old but seventy thousand. Again he became a student, reading Peringuey and Goodwin, Van Riet Lowe and Drennan, so that he would know the uses of the stone tools he was finding every day. "Those stones are not beautiful, yet they are of deep interest when you can identify them," Frank remarked to me. "In time I could imagine the ancient beachcombers scraping their shellfish with flat sea-pebbles; lining their fireplaces with flat stones from the coastline; boring into ostrich eggs with tapered points; pounding their seeds and berries with grindstones. I could visualise them heating 'pot boilers' on the embers and dropping the red hot stones into their clay pots until the water boiled. I saw their old fish-traps in rocky

places, the walls of stone which allowed the fish to enter at high tide and held them when the water level fell. For more than twenty years I lived close to a shell midden. I saw great limpets which do not exist today; shells as large as cups, a whole meal in one shell."

Frank said that high winds, heavy rain and washaways uncovered all sorts of Stone Age treasures. Pottery, coarse and black and broken, also appeared in the sand dunes. Some of the granite rubbing-stones had deep grooves where the hunters ground their arrowheads; better specimens than any he had seen in museums. He stumbled upon many places where primitive man had feasted on the oysters that now cover the lagoon bed like a fossilised carpet. They were enormous oysters and the hungry beachcombers

left their sharp stone knives among the shells. Five hundred feet up on Constable Hill he found sharks' teeth among the phosphates. So the sea had flowed round the hill when it was an island where the seabirds left their droppings. Those were the days when Table Mountain was an island and whales died and became skeletons on the Cape Flats.

"I would like to have met the old Saldanha people," Frank said to me wistfully. "It must have been a weird age - they did not even know how pregnancy came about. When you go back before the dawn of history it puts our troubles in perspective, you know. It's very instructive. Man's story has been so long and so fearful that our own politics seem parochial and contemptible. I read about early man's achievements when I was a boy and

now the whole scene has come to life. Saldanha is rich. It is as old in terms of human life as anywhere in the world. Once the country was covered with trees and ferns and Saldanha Man lived merrily in a shade that has vanished. You can trace the fossil patterns of a botanical wonderland. Very rich, that area. Things are being covered and uncovered all the time, wonderful things."

Frank made a cache of those things. Graham Young, his shipmate, had become a film producer in New York and had spoken of coming to Saldanha to make a picture of the lagoon scene, past and present. South of Vondeling Island there is a group of rocks known locally as Little Vondeling and marked on the charts as Black Rock. You can walk out to this islet at low tide just as the Stone Age people walked, and the

Strandlopers and Bushmen and Hottentots long after them.²⁹ Frank gathered many of his riches at Little Vondeling, for the ancient peoples had gone to the islet for fish and shellfish and left their tools there. Long afterwards an archaeologist came to Saldanha, and Frank showed him the Little Vondeling relics. "Some experts are arrogant," said Frank. "They are great theorists, great rivals, jealous as actors. And how they hate seeing a rival getting something better than they have found. But this man was different and I showed him some of my treasures. 'This place is very valuable,' the archaeologist commented. 'This is unique.' " Frank told him there were dozens of places like Little Vondeling along those shores. In the

end the archaeologist became more interested in Frank than in the relics. "I think he imagined that he had discovered a living fossil," Frank remarked humorously. "Some miraculous survival from the days of the mammoths. I was not wearing my best clothes and I can hardly blame him. He was an unusual sort of expert for he seemed capable of doubt. Most of them are so very sure of their own versions of man's origin - man, the greatest of all unsolved mysteries on earth."

Next on the Saldanha archaeological scene was Philip George Bateman, a pleasant, studious man I came to know well in later years. Bateman held army, air force and naval commissions in the two world wars. This versatile man had been gassed and wounded in France and had climbed out of an

²⁹ See appendix: Strandlopers.

observation balloon with his parachute on fire. Early in World War II, when the Saldanha entrance was mined, Bateman became a watch keeping officer in the special electrical branch of the South African Navy. He found time when off duty to act as secretary of the archaeological society. He sensed the haunts of Stone Age man, covered the seacoast of Saldanha on foot, examined pans and shell debris and prowled in rock shelters. Next he walked round the northern arm of the bay to Lynch Point, collecting more than two hundred crescents, scrapers and blades.

In the caves of Hoedjies Bay he found recent skeletons, ostrich eggs bored for water and sealed with beeswax and other Bushman relics. (As a contrast with these peaceful ramblings, he was on watch one night when an

unidentified object, presumed to be an enemy submarine, crossed the loops. The switch was thrown and the explosion woke the whole countryside. Soon afterwards the imperturbable Bateman went on with his archaeology.) Bateman felt sure that the lagoon sands would reveal interesting Stone Age sites. First he went to the archives in Cape Town, where that great archivist Colin Graham Botha provided him with copies of Dutch charts of the area dated 1729 and 1738. These charts showed tracks used long ago. The ingenious Bateman then showed the implements and charts to a senior officer and aroused such keen interest that he was able to borrow a small man-o'-war to assist him in his investigations! He crossed the bay as leader of an expedition consisting of one other officer and four ratings. The

ship landed them in a tiny crescent-shaped bay hidden by an island. Bateman followed the track over the dunes shown on the Dutch charts. After trudging through heavy sand Bateman located the koppie marked Uitkyk on the 1738 chart; and finally he reached the Dutch East India Company's post on the lagoon. It was represented on the chart by a flag and one building.

Bateman found that the modern Oude Post consisted of a tiny jetty and a cluster of white cottages. In some rubble near the settlement he discovered a Stone Age grinder in perfect condition. There, too, was a gin bottle of 1800 pattern. Elsewhere the naval archaeologist picked up chips and flakes and a giant crescent of an entirely different culture from the Wilton microliths he had examined on

the northern shores of Saldanha. Before the war ended Bateman published a useful report indicating the possibilities of the Saldanha area.

Just after the war Dr. G. J. Smit and his son, a medical student, were sauntering over the farm Elandsfontein with their shotguns in search of buck and game birds.³⁰ They found much larger game that day, for the south-east gales had torn away a blanket of sand and the fossilised bones and teeth of extinct animals lay exposed. Elandsfontein is about seven miles from the eastern shore of the lagoon. Once this was lush country, fed by rivers with sub-tropical scenery more like the Congo than the Cape. There was also a period when the sea invaded the

³⁰ See appendix: Elandsfontein.

Saldanha country, for sharks' teeth have been dug up far inland. The site at Elandsfontein one hundred and fifty thousand years ago must have been very different from the glaring, sandy landscape of today. Great beasts drank at the vleis and primitive man waited there to trap and kill and satisfy his hunger for meat.

Dr. Smit and his son gazed at the fossilised bones scoured out by the wind and realised at once that these were no ordinary relics of departed farm animals. They collected fragments and handed them over to the University of Cape Town anatomy department. The veteran Professor M. S. Drennan and his assistant Dr. Ronald Singer visited the wind scoured floors of the farm and many famous anatomists and archaeologists followed them over the rough farm

tracks to the site. Frank Wightman trudged happily from the lagoon to the excavations. Professor Raymond Dart went there, and Dr. H. B. S. Cook the geologist; the Rev. P. Teilhard de Chardin and Dr. K. P. Oakley of the British Museum; the unknown hermit and the great names in the world of archaeology. Professor A. J. H. Goodwin traced the story back to a sandy plateau drained to the west by watercourses. Dunes blocked the flow, waterholes were formed in the bush-steppe environment, the pans became the haunts of animals and the men who left stone implements. One man left his own fossilised skull. Sand and mud rich in lime preserved these relics and they remained almost undisturbed through the ages.

Frank Wightman gazed at the bones and the importance of the Elands-

fontein finds became clear to him. Mankind is now supposed by many scientists to have emerged in Africa about one million years ago. Lemurs, apes and monkeys had then been on the scene for seventy million years; a period considered sufficiently lengthy for the miracle of evolution to come about in some inexplicable way. Ape-men, the scientists believe, were using pebbles as tools two million years ago. Man, however, has been defined as a creature not only able to use tools but to make them. Man became human, they say, when he thought out the hand-axe, a tool with a sharp edge and a handle. Dr. Leakey claimed to have found the oldest "true man" in the Olduvai gorge in East Africa, a tiny fellow he called *Homo habilis* or "*handy-man*". Dr. H. B. S. Cook declared that one of Leakey's forms

"was not very far removed from the point where the ape line and the human line diverged". Something like human status has been claimed for the *Australopithecus* discovered by Professor Raymond Dart at Taung in the north-west Cape, and by Dr. Robert Broom near Krugersdorp. They may have been ferocious man-like apes with a taste for meat. Dart himself wrote: "These folk tore the battered bodies of their quarries apart limb from limb, slaked their thirst like ravenous men with hot blood and consumed the flesh raw; or like early man some of them understood the advantages of fire as well as the uses of missiles, bulbs and daggers. Fire may have been employed,, but it needs corroboration. They stand in respect of brain size, manufacture of tools and knowledge of fire on the very

threshold of humanity. Whether they crossed that threshold is an enigma for future anthropologists; but it is a puzzle in the human story to which Africa doubtless holds the answer.”

The skull of an early human being, almost complete, came to light in 1921 in the Broken Hill mine. Massive brow ridges gave the skull a frightening appearance and the African labourers took one glance at it and ran. This skull has much in common with the Neanderthal man of Europe; both these primitive men walked upright. Broken Hill Man, the *Homo rhodesiensis* of the scientists, had very little forehead, a large mouth and short neck. His story resembled *Homo sapiens* rather than *Homo habilis*. He was an ugly customer, but he could make tools and use fire and so he must have crossed the threshold. Scientists

have deduced that he went naked, mud and fat plastered over his coarse hair. His skin colour was unknown though he was probably dark. He talked a language of grunts and clicks. So gross was the skull that some scientists declared it could not be a normal bone formation. The ridge, they said, was due to the rare overgrowth disease called acromegaly. Professor Hooton of Harvard expressed his feelings thus: “The first glance at this skull shocks even the hardened anthropologist.”

It seems that *Homo rhodesiensis* spread out over a wide area. Either he reached Saldanha, or primitive man from Saldanha reached Rhodesia. So we now approach the important discoveries on the farm Elandsfontein. Dr. Singer, assisted by Dr. Keith jolly, a university field officer and archaeologist, worked at the Elandsfontein site

for years, riding over the dunes on donkeys, bringing in loads of valuable fossils and implements. Burnished clean by the hard-driven sand, the wealth of fossil material was well-preserved; and as time went on the scientists realised that this Stone Age site was the finest of its kind in Southern Africa. The range of animal relics was staggering. Goodwin summed it up in these words: "While through the ages some mammal has died on every square yard of South African soil the interesting position at Elandsfontein has been that the bones have been mineralised and preserved more or less where they have fallen."

In spite of vultures and man and the removal of some of the upper layers of bone for use as fertiliser, Frank Wightman saw that much had remained undisturbed through long ages, safe

beneath the sand that had blown away at last. At the end of ten years Singer and his colleagues, aided by teams of university students, had recovered twenty thousand fossils, six thousand stone artefacts and the bones of thirty-five different types of mammals. Singer deduced that lack of water elsewhere had forced all these animals to gather at this reliable drinking place. Here the lion had fought the sabretoothed tiger and both these carnivorous beasts had preyed on the antelopes. A fossil skull and horn cores proved that an extinct buffalo had slaked its thirst there; a buffalo with horns spanning twelve feet. A rare type of extinct giraffe was identified by its molars, the *Griquathesium* with short neck and antlers. Prehistoric zebras were plentiful, as shown by the teeth of the extinct *Equus capensis*. A

rare giant warthog was found, almost as large as the rhinoceros of our own times. The large cave hyena, now extinct, met the ordinary black-backed jackal and Cape hunting-dog at the waterhole. Bones of hippo and black and white rhino showed that these ancient monsters were replicas of the species we know today. Among the antelope relics was an extinct cross between a roan and a sable. Otherwise the buck were those we still have with us: black and white wildebeest, blesbok and hartebeest, grey duiker, steenbok, reedbuck and springbok, bushbuck, roan and sable antelope, kudu, eland and gazelle. Lechwe, which disappeared from the Cape before Van Riebeeck arrived, were present in this great concourse of wild life. Fierce, enormous baboons joined the throng, leaving their bones among

the tiny birds and tortoise carapaces. No wonder Singer summed up: "This remarkable site has to be seen to be believed. Here is a mirror of the Cape one hundred and fifty thousand years ago, a place where time stands still."

Of course the sensational discovery at Elandsfontein was the skull found in January 1953 by Keith Jolly. When the fossilised fragments had been built up in the laboratory there appeared before the astonished eyes of the scientists a replica of the horrifying Broken Hill skull. The low vault, the low sloping forehead and most obvious feature of all, the protuberant brow-ridges; these signs could not be mistaken. Drennan gave judgment in these words: "So similar are the two crania that they might even belong to the same race. Differences are apparently so minute that they prove conclusively that the

Broken Hill skull is not (as was once strongly suggested) a case of Neanderthal man who suffered from acromegaly.”

Singer discovered another human skull fragment some time later, and a small portion of a human jaw. It has not been possible to prove that the jaw belonged to Jolly's skull. As one celebrated anatomist remarked: “God made the cranium, the devil made the mandible.” Drennan created a new species, *Homo saldanensis*, for the Elandsfontein skull. Other experts objected (as usual) and one W. L. Straus remarked: “There has been too much blithe creation of new species or even genera of fossil men.” Straus held that both Rhodesian and Saldanha Man belonged to the species *Homo sapiens*. No missing link has ever been found. It is indeed probable that

Saldanha man, if he could be seen in the flesh, would not shock those of us who have watched the wild Bushmen in the desert.

Singer and others have ventured on interesting descriptions of Saldanha Man. Fluorine and uranium tests have proved that the skull is as old as the oldest extinct animals found at Elandsfontein; and certain scientists are inclined to place Saldanha Man as older than Rhodesian Man. Yet in the evolutionary sense these two humans born two thousand miles apart were as alike as brother and sister. The brain-box of Saldanha Man was one-tenth smaller than the Broken Hill skull and one-fifth smaller than the Neanderthal skull. Man had not yet reached Europe when Saldanha Man was roaming these west coast beaches. Saldanha Man was eating the lagoon oysters and

drinking at the Elandsfontein spring before the first glaciation in Europe.

Frank Wightman visualised Saldanha Man as a stooping, shaggy, large-headed fellow with the brows of a gorilla. He carried a pear-shaped hand-axe and dug pits to trap game; but the excavations failed to provide any evidence that he could make fire. It seems that other members of the race were spread widely over the face of Southern Africa, though the actual clans or tribes cannot have been large. Saldanha Man was the Hand-axe Man, the old human who was content with this primitive tool for thousands of years, longest of the human cultural periods. No doubt Saldanha Man used missile stones. Fifty thousand years ago man invented new tools and made his first camp-fires. Frank thought it was possible that the descendants of

Saldanha Man lived to see these tremendous changes before they were exterminated by a more cunning race.

Often and often Frank Wightman gazed over the ancient sands of Saldanha and wondered whether the secret of man's past would be found there or in some other vast burial ground such as this. Man's story is immensely long. His own bones are so frail that even the fragment of Saldanha Man ranks as treasure-trove in terms of prehistory. How daring the scientists are when they attempt to unlock the doors of the past. People driven by intense scientific curiosity do not always make pleasant discoveries. Some have confessed to uneasy feelings and momentary hesitation as they stood on the very brink of a glimpse into an unknown

epoch. What have we solved? For us, life is still essentially as great a mystery as it was for Saldanha Man. How did this old hunter acquire his conscience, his sense of humour, the ability to paint and create music? We have the stones he used, and the stones tell us little but the obvious story of dull brains making an advance of excruciating slowness in the design of implements. They reveal the presence of man but not the point in prehistory when he became more than an animal.

Frank pointed out that science consisted of facts and demanded our respect. "When the scientist allows his imagination to run riot then we have pseudo-science, brilliant ideas which appear to explain everything from the creation of the universe to the appearance of mankind," Frank went on. "The scientists looked over most

of this earth for their beloved ape-man, claiming to have discovered him in China and Java and other likely and unlikely places. Now most of them have fixed on Africa as the cradle of mankind. Here, they say, lived the earliest apes and here the earliest stone tools were made. Here was a climate which allowed primitive man to develop when Europe was in the grip of ice. However, a wise historian once remarked: 'Any outline of prehistory must be tentative, since future finds are likely to necessitate major reassessments.' "

It is a great search, but Frank doubted whether the sands of Saldanha or any other stretch of the earth's surface would ever reveal the deep mystery of man's origin.

CHAPTER 13

THE MAMMOTH TOOTH

*Lumping through the oak-swamp, vast
and dim and grey,
I have watched the mammoths pass at
dusk of day;
Through the quaking hollow, through
the tree-trunks stark,
Gleams of mighty ivory breaking up the
dark.*

P. R. CHALMERS

ONE OF Frank Wightman's most interesting finds in the sands of the Saldanha coast was a mammoth tooth. I never saw it and it was only towards the end of his life that Frank told me the story. He was secretive because he dreaded inquisitive crowds. He said that once the discovery appeared in the newspapers he would be overwhelmed by the mob.

It was a molar tooth Frank picked up. There was not a fragment of a tusk. He puzzled over it in the cabin of Wylo night after night and rightly surmised that the huge white tooth was a relic of some primitive elephant. The tooth had come to the surface after one of those great south-east gales that had revealed other traces of the ancient lagoon world. Frank remembered that he had seen a number of long bones in the sand with the tooth; but he had taken little notice of them at the time and when he returned to the spot some time later he could not find the bones. At last he took the tooth to Cape Town and went to a scientist who identified it as a molar tooth of *Paleoloxodon*, the African mammoth. Frank noted further sources of information. The scientist was curious and wanted the tooth for a museum, but Frank

remained secretive and took the tooth back to the lagoon with him. Years passed before another mammoth tooth was found in the area, and that was unearthed at the Saldanha skull site.

Frank studied the mammoth and found that the presence of mammoth relics in Southern Africa was not suspected until early this century. The hairy elephant was linked mainly with Siberia, where thousands of curved tusks and a number of marvellously preserved bodies had been discovered. Mammoth flesh preserved in the ice was devoured by wolves, bears, dogs and humans; flesh that had rested in the deep-freeze of the north for ten thousand years. Mammoth tusks were used by Chinese craftsmen long ago and in more recent years the Czars of Russia held a monopoly in the valuable ivory. Skeletons of mammoths

found in other parts of Europe gave rise to legends of human giants. Plutarch recorded the grave of a giant in Libya, probably an African mammoth.

The mammoth and its cousin the mastodont had an enormous range. They wandered all over the northern hemisphere in the Pleistocene age, which lasted about half a million years. Some say they migrated down the Nile; certainly they reached the southern tip of Africa. Professor Raymond Dart has suggested that Southern Africa was the most fertile background for the evolution of the mammoth. Either that or Southern Africa became a cul-de-sac in which the evolutionary products of the north became superimposed one upon another. Dart thought that South

Africa was the evolutionary home of the modern elephant.

Mammoths were not the giants of popular imagination. They were in fact about the same size as the modern Indian elephant. Many were no more than nine feet high at the shoulder but they were massive. Their ears and eyes were small. The back sloped to the short tail. They were covered with thick coats of coarse hair reaching to the ground; and beneath the hair they were further protected by a layer of brown wool. Their tusks were huge. (There is one in the South Kensington museum measuring fourteen feet round the curve and this is not a record.) A heavy mammoth tusk weighs two hundred pounds; four times the weight of the average modern elephant tusk. Often the mammoth tusks re-curved with the tips

crossing or pointing towards each other. Such tusks would have been useless for digging and this is one of the mysteries of the mammoth, one that still baffles naturalists. There is a theory, however, that when the mammoths had to dig for water they possessed straight tusks. After the climate had become cooler and wetter the tusks curled as a result of idleness. It has also been suggested that the curved tusks were used as snow-ploughs or sweeps to push aside bushes; while the hooked extremities could have pulled down and retained the branches of coniferous and other nourishing trees.

Frank traced the first mammoth discovery in South Africa back to a chemist named Krumbelt, who found a fragment of a tooth on the Vaal River diamond diggings near Kimberley.

That was more than sixty years ago. Krumbelt showed the tooth to a geologist, Professor Richard Beck, at the time of the British Association visit. Beck compared it with specimens in the British Museum and thus established the presence of the species in South Africa during the Pleistocene age. All the previous African specimens had come from Egypt, Tunis and Algeria. Two decades passed and then two mammoth teeth were found with a collection of very early stone implements on the Vaal near Bloemhof and were sent to Dart. Dr. S. Haughton described them as the teeth of an unknown prehistoric elephant species, possibly ancestors of the African elephant. This elephant was entirely different from any living or known fossil form. Tusks were also found on

the Vaal but these were thrown away before they could be examined by scientists. Relics of another extinct species, a mammoth new to science, were found in the dunes of the Zululand coast. As a result of these discoveries Professor Dart declared that the southern mammoth, the *Archidiskodon*, first appeared in India, migrated west to southern Europe and east to America. These were the mammoths that gave rise in early Pleistocene times to the Imperial Mammoth the last of the race. The mammoths crossed the equator and reached Southern Africa in well-advanced Pleistocene times. Here the *Archidiskodons* were also probably the last of their kind as they were found in the lowest Vaal River gravels. Dart said the line of migration of the southern mammoths was shown by the

recovery of a tooth sixty feet below the level of the Nile at Khartoum. There were at least two distinct species of mammoths in South Africa. It was probable that they replaced the mastodons in this area.

Mr. L. Laurenson, an amateur archaeologist, discovered a mammoth "graveyard" on the shore of Table Bay near the Milnerton lagoon about thirty years ago. Other mammoth relics have been found close to Cape Town in recent years. Dart pointed out that primitive man had slain and eaten the Bloemhof mammoth, leaving only two teeth, "The carnivorous diet called our ancestors from the forests to the plains," Dart suggested. "Every race of mankind have been animal hunters and flesh-eaters. Anthropology helps us to understand ourselves. This is the greatest of all human studies. The

search and the chase forced primitive man to adopt a more upright posture. Speed, dexterity of hand, a steady eye, sustained attention and team work turned our sub-human ancestors into human beings."

Frank Wightman absorbed the story of the mammoth and found himself brooding over two great mysteries. How did primitive man succeed in killing the mammoth? Why did the whole race of mammoths become extinct, not only in South Africa but everywhere from Siberia to England? Frank sat in his cabin trying to reconstruct the scene. He imagined the Bushmen finding and following the tracks of the mammoth until they came upon the hairy monster squirting water over his black shaggy coat in some vanished river. The mammoth would sink down, roll and splash and

rise to shake off the water. Would the hunters aim at the trunk, loose their poisoned arrows and then run for their lives? It seemed unlikely. Arrows would be for smaller prey. A mammoth bathing or tearing off branches, rooting up grass for food, would be a terrifying spectacle. The scream of an angry mammoth would chill the bravest Bushman hunter. Did they ring the mammoth with fire and spear the dazed and maddened creature as it broke through the flames? Now and again possibly, though such a method would not often succeed. Could they climb a tree beside the mammoth track, wait for the beast and drop a weighted harpoon into the body as it passed? It would be hard to find a vital spot. A sudden and unexpected attack with a spear might cause a fatal wound, but how many

Bushmen would dare to approach a mammoth and plunge a spear into the neck, throat or belly? Frank decided that the beachcombing Bushmen or Strandlopers must have trapped the huge beasts in pitfalls. At that period, of course, the Saldanha lagoon country was covered with trees. The hunters dug pits across the paths of the mammoths; deep pits with sloping walls, pits covered with branches. The legs of the mammoth would be pinned together in the narrow base of the pit and escape would be impossible. The hunters might have fixed stakes in the pits so that their victims would impale themselves on the sharp points; or they might have attacked the trapped mammoths with spears and waited for them to bleed to death.

The extinction of the mammoth posed a far greater riddle. Some authorities

have declared that primitive man wiped them out; but Frank Wightman attacked this theory vigorously. "Mammoths lived in great numbers in countries untrodden by human feet," Frank reminded me. "They were so numerous that 'mines' of mammoth tusks have been worked by the Russians for a century or more and still the tusks are found, scores and hundreds of tusks. African hunters, black and white, have not exterminated the elephant; nor have the Indian hunters. But the formidable mammoth with his armour of tough hide perished by the thousand. I cannot believe that man wiped out the mammoth as he slaughtered the dodo and the great auk. They lived together and the cave man carved weapons from mammoth ivory and painted mammoths on the walls of his caves.

But the hunter never won the last battle with the mammoth. Some other unexplained force intervened."

Frank went over the theories. He regarded the death of the mammoths as the most fascinating mystery in the whole realm of natural history. Some of the frozen mammoths, the complete specimens found after thousands of years, may have become bogged owing to their great weight and died standing up while the mud closed over them. They were found with buttercups and delicate grasses in their mouths, branches and pine-cones and mosses in their stomachs; clear proof that the climate of Siberia was once mild and sunny. Yet the mammoths must have been frozen at temperatures below minus one hundred and fifty degrees Fahrenheit. It has been suggested that the mammoths fell into

glaciers in a land that was otherwise fertile; but this theory was not supported by the discoveries. They found the mammoths in a layer of silt and thawed them out after thousands of years in those icy tombs. Did they starve to death? No, the preserved bodies were strong and well-nourished and in no specimen was there a sign of disease. The food in their stomachs disproved the theories of drought and pestilence. The frozen mammoths were not old and toothless; there were fine animals among them. Was an enormous forest fire responsible? There were no signs of burns. Possibly some mammoths were overtaken by devastating floods during their migrations and drowned; but this theory does not explain the widespread destruction of the species. It is a fact, however, that islands off the Siberian

coast were formed of sand, ice and mammoth bones, all swept out of flooded rivers. But the mammoths were exterminated in tens of thousands, possibly on the same day, and so quickly that they had no time to swallow the buttercups in their mouths. They grazed on land now covered by the North Sea and trawlers still haul mammoth relics to the surface in their nets. A few preserved carcasses of the extinct woolly rhinoceros were found with mammoths in Siberia, but the mammoths were definitely not killed by these or any other animals. Mammoths were so bulky, so well protected, that they could have defended themselves against the other fauna of their time. Siberian peasants, finding the mammoth remains below

the earth, thought they were gigantic moles that burrowed in the tundra.

Was it the cold of the ice-cap moving south that killed the northern mammoths? Their fur and hair should have made them oblivious to the freezing climate. Moreover the mammoths perished not only in Siberia but in South Africa. Dust storms of intense ferocity, earthquakes, volcanoes and landslides have all been put forward by those seeking the answer to the mammoth riddle. Professor H. H. Howorth summed up: "There is one inevitable conclusion. The mammoth perished in some catastrophe which operated over a wide area. It was not a slow process. I believe a great flood was the cause." The flood is controversial but many other scientists agree with the theory of a sudden, overwhelming cataclysm.

The mammoths did not suffer from food shortage, though each great creature needed several hundred pounds of food daily to survive. They were munching their buttercups and grasses happily when something struck them. An ice-cold blast, perhaps, that entered their lungs with a searing pain. They died where they stood, they sank into the snow and remained there through the centuries.

Ivan Sanderson, a naturalist who has made a special investigation of the mammoth riddle in recent years, pointed out that no one really knows why any animal became extinct. He does not believe that man was responsible for the disappearance of the mammoth, for human beings were rare ten thousand years ago while mammoths were plentiful. If some tremendous hurricane had arisen man

also would have perished. Sanderson had two theories, though he was not dogmatic. He thought the mammoths might have died out because they were too large for their environment. He also mentioned the possibility of a disease carried by bats.

It seems that the mammoths lived on in Africa long after they had become extinct in the northern countries. Frank Wightman visited many Bushman caves with walls adorned with the friezes of the game of the little hunters. He saw eland and springbok there, ostriches and buffalo, zebra and elephant. But the mammoths painted by the cave men of Europe were not to be seen in the caves north of the Saldanha area; evidently those Bushman artists had never seen the shaggy mammoths with their curved tusks. Frank wondered whether some

cave high in the Cedarberg, some cave unknown to modern climbers, might still reveal a painting of the vanished mammoths. That mammoth tooth dominated the mind of Frank Wightman for a time. Interesting in itself, the tooth helps to explain the survival of a man, solitary as a ghost, who never had time to become lonely.

CHAPTER 14

ORDEALS AND PLEASURES

*“There are two ways of being happy;
we may
diminish our wants or augment our
means;
either will do; the result is the same
and it is
for each man to decide for himself.”*

BENJAMIN FRANKLIN

WHAT HAPPENS to a lagoon hermit when he injures himself or falls ill? Frank Wightman always declared that the risk of illness was far greater in the cities; a man leading a natural and untroubled life had the odds in his favour. I think he was right. Nevertheless there were times when a lonely man lacking the fortitude of a Frank Wightman would have gone through agonising days and nights of pain and

self-pity. “Recover or die” must be the grim watchword of the sick hermit.

Frank returned to the lagoon from Cape Town one evening with food poisoning. All that night and all next day he lay sweating, one attack of diarrhoea following another. He became extremely weak and he had no medicines. His clock stopped and he had no idea of the number of hours he spent in his bunk. However, he took no food, drank nothing but water and recovered. His ribs were sticking out after the long fast but he ended the illness by diving over the side into the cleansing lagoon.

Once he was well up on the mainmast when he fell. His most vivid memory was the sound his body made as it struck the deck. A sense of violence and shock followed. He was on his feet at once, trying to assure himself

that everything was all right apart from three crushed fingers. Then he found a bruise between the shoulders like two large overripe mangoes. His head snapped back when he landed and thudded on the canvas; yet there were no other ill-effects. He traced the cause of the fall to an old halyard parting where it went over a block.

Frank endured five or six weeks of pain when he returned to the lagoon with the stump of a tooth which a dentist had failed to extract. The gum became septic. Instead of hurrying back to Cape Town he drank milk and lay awake suffering. "It was like sheet lightning seen behind the dark cloud of constant pain," Frank declared. I never discovered why he played the stoic on this occasion. The only explanation he could give me was that he thought his friends would send him to

hospital. At last Frank arrived at the Thomas home with the stump showing above the gum. Llewellyn Thomas hauled it out with pliers and the dreadful affair ended.

On a stormy evening Frank was rowing back to Wylo when an oar struck his mouth and damaged a tooth. Foolishly he again endured days of pain before he made up his mind to see a Cape Town dentist. A number of teeth had to come out and the dentist advised him to wear a plate. Frank saved up for months. The upper and lower set cost him twenty pounds and he was very unhappy about the episode. "My false teeth are fine as far as wearing and appearing go - and talking," Frank told me. "But I still take out the lower set on the rare occasions when I eat. I often wonder why I had a lower set made. There are

enough of my own teeth downstairs to make eating easy. The lower set is a mere narrow ridge that rests on the lower gum and jigs up and down and clicks when I eat. I feel like throwing it overboard. Meanwhile I'm twenty pounds down the drain."

A tiny splinter of steel lodged in Frank's left eye while he was working on his wire rigging. He doubled his reading glasses over the right eye for greater magnification and extracted the splinter with tweezers. Frank disliked wearing glasses for reading and he carried out exercises to restore the eye muscles. He was unsuccessful. When he broke his glasses he found a way of pinching up the eye muscles so that the eyeballs were forced into focus. He felt uncomfortable but it enabled him to read during a spell of

several weeks when he did not wish to leave the yacht.

Portuguese men-o'-war or "blue-bottles" float into the lagoon at times, with stinging-cells like tentacles.³¹ Frank dived over the side one morning without noticing the menace. His hair kept the threads off his face but they touched his shoulders and caused the sort of weal's brought up by a school caning. The contact lasted only a second or two, yet the poison was so strong that Frank felt as though hot wires had been laid across his back. The burning pain went on for hours and he had no calamine or picric acid on board. That night there was only a small, dull ache. Seven years later Frank made the same mistake again.

³¹ See appendix: Portuguese men-o'-war.

Time to forget! One of the frightening blue streamers passed across the under-lid of the right eye. The pain was so severe that he rowed across to Langebaan for help. One eye was blurred, as though he had opened it under water. There was no doctor in the village so he waited and the pain became less intense. After he had pulled back to the yacht he felt that the eye would heal itself in time. It did but his sight only became normal two days later.

Frank had an even more dangerous encounter with a sting-ray, the *pylstert* dreaded by Cape fishermen. He was swimming under *Wylo* with his eyes open when he saw the mottled fish, about two feet long, with its squarish body and sharp tail. It brushed against him, marking his body with its rough skin; but fortunately it did not attack

him. Frank made for his dinghy and rolled in thankfully. Swimming was part of Frank's daily life, like walking and rowing. There were winter days when the daily swim was an ordeal faced only for personal hygiene; but such days were rare. I always regarded Frank as an expert in the water and I was surprised when he told me (at the age of sixty-five) that he had been taking lessons in the crawl stroke from an ex-Olympic champion. "He taught me a lot," Frank declared. "How to lie in the water. How to breathe when swimming. How to relax the whole body while the arms and legs do the work. How to keep the body on one dead level in the water while swimming. It is a suave, silken powerful stroke and I am just getting into the feel of it. I love watching the champion - he goes through the water

like a projectile though his action is absurdly casual and leisurely. He planes over the water like a surf-board and you would have to walk briskly to keep up with him. Yet he seems to be loitering. Would that I could swim like that! I hope to live to two hundred now, just so that I can learn to swim like that.”

Frank spent more time than ever in the water after those lessons. He said that his sixty-five-year-old lungs were serving him better than they did when he was thirty-five. People think of breathing as just filling the lungs, but the champion said that was useless unless the lungs were first emptied. “Swim slow,” the champion advised him. Speed must not be attempted until the rhythm of the crawl becomes as instinctive as walking. In the trudgeon Frank thought he was waving

his arms all over the horizon. In the crawl the arms move close to the body, reaching out and then thrusting deeply and brushing out at the thighs. The legs are an urgent flicker with a gentle flex at the knee. Beyond the threshing feet there is a slipstream as though a propeller was at work. After three months Frank felt that he had mastered the complex rhythm. The only exertion was muscular, thanks to correct breathing.

Insomnia was Frank’s only chronic ailment, as I have said, and he treated it with such a degree of success that he refused to regard his sleepless nights as a sign of ill-health. “Ever since I was a child I have slept very lightly,” Frank explained. “It is one of the problems I have never solved. My idea is that if you have a sensitive registering mechanism, if you observe

everything then you sleep little. Perhaps we need little sleep, though in a city we ought to sleep twelve hours a day to blot out the ugliness. I never rest or sleep after lunch. 'Save it for the night,' I say to myself. At four or five in the afternoon I have a meal and I drink water before turning in at eleven. That's why my machine goes so well. And of course one of the charms of an evening's drinking in town is that I sleep wonderfully when I'm plastered. As a rule I regard myself as fortunate when I get six hours sleep."

Frank experimented with brandy on board *Wylø* in his search for an insomnia remedy. Two large tots and he slept. This went on for three nights and it still worked. Each morning he woke feeling that he was seventeen years old; yet after those three nights

he stopped drinking. He was really hoping that the night's rest would enable him to break through the word barrier and write a masterpiece. And he failed. "I wrote like a portentous butler," Frank confessed to me.

At sea Frank loved the moon for she revealed the night to him. Sitting in the darkness at the tiller he made his obeisance and called her "queen of the night." But on the lagoon his values altered. He had to cover the hatch so that the livid eye of the moon would not light on his sleeping face.

During one serious discussion on the subject of health I asked Frank whether he ever feared dying alone on board *Wylø*. He laughed and replied in all sincerity: "It does not matter how you die - it's how you live that's important." The kayak that carried Frank out to the ocean almost drowned

him during a hard winter northerly blow on the lagoon. He was paddling to one of the lagoon villages, surfing most of the time before a strong wind that threw up small seas even between the lagoon sandbanks. Frank found the kayak in a nose-dive that he was unable to control. She went down for'ard, then over. Frank was in his clothes because of the cold weather. He had to get out of his clothes, then swim for his life. His wallet and his money were lost with his clothes but he hardly thought of that as he made for the land a mile away. "I was swimming clumsily and stupidly towards the end," Frank told me. "Though I had no fear of drowning I thought I was going to collapse owing to exposure. It was so cold that after a time I could not feel my feet or hands. The life force was abandoning the

suburbs and fighting on right inside me. I was stupid because my brain was ill-nourished. I flopped about as the life force retreated. It was an interesting experience even at the time. I realised that when a person loses his life in that way there is no smothering. Up till then I had imagined a sort of strangulation as the lungs filled with water. In fact you lose your senses gradually and at the last moment you would probably know nothing about it. I was close to dying when I found myself in shallow water. My knees gave way as I tried to walk up the beach. I was naked and fairly close to the yacht but I did not feel like swimming as far as that. I crouched behind a bush for shelter from the wind. Then I saw the kayak drifting past Kraal Point on the tide, and I recovered it. That ordeal gave me

something to think about - I was still getting to know the lagoon in those days. In the main channel, with the tide running strongly against a northerly sea, you have to be very careful. You have to outmanoeuvre the hollow seas. Of course there have been a number of drowning's over the years, mainly drunken Norwegians from the whaling stations. I had no excuse."

Indeed the lagoon was not always a calm lagoon and there was a gale in a wintry August which threatened *Wylo* at her moorings. She had a heavy mooring, a good swivel, then fifty feet of heavy steamer chain shackled to lighter but strong galvanised chain. During the years in Kraal Bay there had been many days when Frank had been pinned down on board *Wylo* because of heavy weather; days when

the dinghy would have been swamped between the yacht and the beach. But in all those years *Wylo* had never been in danger. Then came the northerly hurricane that hammered the whole Cape coast, blew the roofs off Cape Town houses, uprooted hundreds of trees and sank fishing boats at their moorings. Ocean-going ships were not allowed to leave Table Bay Docks; a gust of wind recorded there exceeded one hundred miles an hour. "I thought I was going to lose my ship in the lagoon," Frank told me. "It lasted eight hours and it was a hell of a blow. I was up all night but there was nothing I could do. It blew so hard that I could not stand on deck - I would have been blown overboard without a lashing. Often I thought that chain and timber could not stand the strain. The mooring-chain was right out of the

water, taut as piano-wire. Poor old *Wylo* went right through the seas - she could not rise to them. The hurricane stripped the veld. Tumbleweed was flying like feathers. Seabirds were driven off the beaches. Then the wind shifted a little and the danger passed. There wasn't an insect on the veld for weeks afterwards."

Even more dangerous, perhaps, was an ordeal in Riet Bay, close to the Donkergat whaling station, where Frank had anchored *Wylo* after a tough winter passage from Table Bay. She was close up to Meeuw Island, so close that Frank could have flung a stone on shore. A northerly came through unexpectedly with low scud. Frank let out all his chain and felt secure. Then the wind blew in trumpeting gusts, whipping the whole bay white. The anchor-chain was

ominously taut but *Wylo* seemed to be lying comfortably though she shuddered in the gusts. Suddenly the bow swung away from the wind and *Wylo* drifted broadside across Riet Bay as the anchor dragged. Frank hauled up the mizzen to bring her head to wind, for she was being flung sideways in great lurches as she lost the protection of Meeuw Island. Hoisting the mizzen in that force of wind had taken most of the skin from Frank's hands, but the sail steadied her for a moment. She was still drifting slowly. Down to leeward there was a coast of jagged rocks on which huge waves were breaking.

Frank was sure he was going to lose his boat. He slid below and raked out all the canvas bags and cases. In a frenzy he started to pack. Then the anchor bit on a rock, chain squealing over the sheave at the bows. She rode

wildly over the seas but stayed where she was, not fifty feet from the rocks. The dinghy astern was leaping over the hollows in the seas like a porpoise. Frank knew the dinghy would fill, but he could do nothing about that. Anyway, the dinghy would never take him on shore in those seas. Next time Frank glanced astern the dinghy was somersaulting over the rocks. Frank never expected *Wylo* to ride it out because the last thirty feet of her anchor-chain was old, thin, rusty stuff that he seldom used. As a rule he anchored in such shallow water that she was held by the good chain. Frank was always conscious of his size. He said that he was never really fitted for this life because it needed strength and reach. If he anchored *Wylo* in more than twenty feet of water he had to raise a weight of about two hundred

pounds without a winch. It punished his back and thigh muscles. Now he knew that if the chain parted *Wylo* would hit the bottom on rocks with twelve-foot seas driving at her. He doubted whether she would hold together long enough for him to jump. Yet he went on packing in the reeling cabin. He packed odd things; type-writer ribbons, letters, items of no value. His wallet with his few notes he put into a tin, hoping it would drift ashore.

At first Frank decided to strip when the chain parted. He might be able to swim ashore. Then he decided that if one of the towering seas picked him up and surfed him ashore he would be disembowelled on the jagged rocks. So he piled on more clothes and thought he might reach the shore in a sitting position, feet first. Then he

stood in the hatchway looking out at the spray flying over her. Every leap she made wrenched at his heart. The mizzen was roaring and slatting in the screaming wind like a forest fire. He lowered the sail and bent over it, muzzling the folds with a gasket. Then he crouched in the cockpit, shrinking from the yelling wind. The skies opened and down came the deluge. The wind dropped, then shifted. Now it was blowing *Wylo* off the rocks. "In my long experience of these great cyclonic depressions I have never known one of them to bring the 'period of swing' through at that hour," Frank declared. "Always I had known the period to come at one of those dramatic moments in the rhythm of the sea - sunrise, noon, sunset, midnight. Had my prayers been answered? In a light wind, but with the

seas still running high, Frank got the anchor up and sailed *Wylo* to safety. He made Kraal Bay and smothered his torn hands with penicillin ointment, wrapped them in bandages, put on mittens and went on deck. Then, and only then, he looked round. He had been away for weeks but nothing had changed. Constable Hill was green as Ireland now. After all the bucketing and ranging and surging and stress *Wylo* was lying still. He slept that night, his frozen body glowing triumphantly under the blankets.

One of the problems Frank had to face during his years on the lagoon was the care of *Wylo*. The regular painting of the hull below the waterline was essential so that the sinister teredo worm could riot find a way into the planking. Fortunately a wooden boat does not become foul in the lagoon

nearly so fast as it does in Table Bay; the weed grows slowly in Saldanha Bay. Yet the time comes when a yacht must be hauled out of the water, scraped and painted. War made it almost impossible for Frank to sail down to Table Bay and use the yacht club slipway. It meant the sort of red-tape which he detested. So he chose the perilous alternative of hauling *Wylo* over a flat slab of rock on the lagoon edge at the top of the tide and propping her up as best he could; no easy matter when you think of the great mass of deadwood above the keel. When the tide went out he scrubbed and painted her. I know he was fully aware of the risks he ran. If he had been trapped under the hull, if the weight had failed to kill him instantly, there would have been a long wait for the tide to rise and drown

him. Yet he chose that method twice a year for the first three years, tending *Wylo* with the utmost care so that her timber would be sound on the day when he sailed away across the ocean. Then he would haul her back with the aid of kedge anchors, off the flat rock and back to her moorings. On each occasion he rejoiced when he thought of the thick coat of copper paint he had given her. Each coppering meant nine hours of tiresome painting with a broad, heavy brush and very thick paint. Then he had to give his bronzed face a paraffin massage to remove the paint spots. He always swam under *Wylo* at such times, exulting at her new, glowing redness.

I watched Frank making his own sails on the beach at Kraal Bay. He would pile the canvas and tools into the dinghy until the gunwale was almost

awash and stagger over to the beach. There he would select a large flat space and mark out a vast new mainsail. He ran about outside the design so that his footsteps would not blur the sacred lines. The golden sands were covered with canvas. A pencil screeched over warp and weft. Scissors clicked like the jaws of a ravenous crocodile. Then he would gather up tapestries of canvas and run round and 'lay it' again. He was a fine craftsman. As I watched he marked the sail up to the throat. This would be a good sail to face the hazards of the sea. A sail fortified with honest hand-stitching with flax sewing-twine, loaded with beeswax. "I'm thrilled by a new mainsail," Frank declared. "I shall look at it away out at sea when the winds are humming and the sail is

cupped and thank God it was hand-sewn."

All through the years on the lagoon, almost until the end, Frank cherished the illusion that he was going to sea in *Wylo* again. "As I grow old *Wylo* becomes increasingly valuable as my escape route," he told me. "She must always be sound enough to reach the open sea. I love her because if at last I acquire a clot or a cancer or a heart flutter there will be no witchdoctors with their potions and incantations, no hospitals with their soulless routine. Long ago I built my escape. It was not that sort of escape then. She allowed me to escape from the city and now she will provide me with the final escape from creeping decrepitude. Not that old age has sounded its preliminary grunt yet - far from it."

When Frank spoke in this way he reminded me strongly of Jack London's character in "The Turtles of Tasman," the ageing adventurer planning expeditions which he was really too old to carry out. Frank spoke with enthusiasm of a cruise which would show him whether he wanted to go on living. It would also give him a story worth writing. It would be instructive for there would be no divided loyalties. He would sail alone and surrender his personality to the sea. So many who ventured into that strange world were armoured against its impact. Alain Gerbault³² was invulnerably encased in his own philosophy of life and his prejudices. Slocum³³ was religious. Harry Pidgeon was moulded in

placidity. Frank declared that none of the great single handers appeared to have sensed the eerie, unearthly quality of the sea's message; or if they had, they failed to record it in their books. "Perhaps one must be accoutred with Conrad's word-sense and Graham Greene's awareness," Frank summed up. "It is an adventure of the mind."

Frank often tried to leave the lagoon during the summer holidays. Speed-boats invaded Kraal Bay and bathing parties screamed on the beaches. "Excitable people with dogs," Frank moaned. "Men, women and children shouting at the tops of evil voices. Dogs yapping at nothing. Goats on the hillside pick up the hysteria and yell weh-weh-weh. The lagoon sounds like the padded cell of a madhouse and I shall be glad when they rattle away.

³² See appendix: Gerbault, Alain

³³ See appendix: Slocum, Captain Joshua.

Humanity is hideous. I love youth but there is a raucous exhibitionism about them when they are together. They remind me of the so-called playground at Berkhamsted where the central tenet of our religion was: 'Ah ken frow a stone furer n'wot yew ken'. God may have designed us in his image but he might have veiled the earlier phases. However, the periods of solitude make up for the invasions. The gutter is not always here. The sun climbs the sky and is followed by the climbing moon. The seasons come and go and the smooth rhythm of life carries us graciously to the grave."

One drunken camping party wrecked Frank's kayak while he was away. Frank cleaned up the beaches afterwards; burnt the paper and cartons and buried the empty tins and broken bottles. He watched some of the

visitors in astonishment, for they sailed their boats right up to the beach, bumping over the rocks. Then he would hear the "tinned yawping" of a portable wireless set. Frank could not understand people coming into this solitude and bringing the city with them. They should have been interested in something different, but they were not. New Year lunacy, Frank called it. He had to wear a bathing costume, of course, when there were families on the beaches. But at last he would watch them packing up and clearing out and with a fierce renewal of pleasure he would look out over the blessed emptiness of the lagoon.

Late in 1957 Frank discovered that he had only eleven pounds in the savings bank. I had warned him often that he could not expect his royalties to go on

for ever; that he would have to write another book if he wished to have even a tiny regular income. The royalties went on for longer than I expected; and as his total expenses during one month at this period were four pounds seven shillings he was not inclined to worry. "Mind you, I eschewed anything that might be regarded as an indulgence to achieve this result," Frank commented. "In my long and uneventful life I have never planned far ahead. It all seemed too precarious for me. Perhaps that's why I shall live to be a hundred. I'm not unhappy. The weather is flawless, the skies are sculptural. I swim half a dozen times a day and climb Constable Hill. I never seem to have any food on board and I thrive on what is not there. I am content."

Nevertheless it was an awkward situation and his friends in town were worried. Frank was not in the mood for writing even a short magazine article. Friends offered to find him work in the city but he shuddered. Then a good friend with knowledge of State pensions remembered Frank's wartime service and produced a form. Frank was incredulous. He consented to sign the form after it had been filled in for him but he laughed at the idea of such an application being granted. A few weeks passed and when the last pound had been drawn out of the saving's bank Frank sold his binoculars for fifteen pounds. Then he received an official letter: "I beg to inform you that you have been awarded a war veteran's pension at the rate of £144 plus £12 temporary bonus per annum." He was instructed to let

them know if his marital or financial status should change. Frank was saved.

Alain Bombard, the foolhardy French doctor who drifted across the Atlantic on a raft without food or water, found a great admirer in Frank Wightman. The charm of the Bombard achievement for Frank lay in the fact that for sixty-five days the doctor had lived on the raw flesh of seabirds and fish and the plankton he gathered in a net. Frank was short of money and suddenly there appeared a man who had proved that it was possible to cruise without paying for a stock of food. At this period Frank sailed down the coast from Saldanha to Table Bay every year or two to put *Wylo* on the yacht club slipway for scraping and painting. He made a plankton net of muslin, collected the grey slime at sea

and ate it. "It tasted like fish paste and it was extremely rich in vitamins," Frank said. "I realised that I could put to sea with nothing but water, catch fish and plankton and survive."

Frank thought that he would have come out of the ordeal better than Bombard. "Mind you, I would never have set out on an air-cushion," Frank admitted. "It was the most unseaworthy thing you could imagine and God knows how he got there. It was a stern test for me in a seaworthy yacht and I was an experienced seaman. I don't know how Bombard remained sane. He was a Frenchman, fond of food and wine, not a suitable specimen for such an experiment. Yet he proved that shipwrecked seamen need not die. My life at sea was a picnic compared with Bombard's adventure."

Frank's short coastal voyages in *Wylo* were not without their own perils. Once he anchored at Dassen Island and left there with a hard, unusual north-east wind. He was racing over a black sea when he decided to take in the mainsail. He went aloft to clear a halyard jammed in a block and strained a ligature in his back. The stoic got the sail down in spite of the pain and made Table Bay under jib and mizzen. "The open sea has a magic and a mystery that turns to petulance and threat near the land", said Frank. "I loved my lady *Wylo* when she tripped her light heels before the trades in the immensity of the open sea. I travailed over her on those coastal trips and hated her vulnerability. She was so often faced with destruction. Some of those passages were so nightmarish that I

decided to stand forty miles out to sea before heading for Table Bay. Anything for sea room!"

Three times Frank nearly lost *Wylo* on that short stretch of coast. Once he was becalmed between Dassen Island and the mainland when the current set him inshore. At sundown *Wylo* was almost in the breakers. Frank had a sixteen-foot sweep with a notch in the counter and a grummet; and he could scull *Wylo* at about one knot when she was clean. In this emergency he could make no headway at all but he managed to keep her off the shore. He sculled from sundown until three in the morning without gaining anything. The breakers were curling a hundred yards away. Then a fishing-boat came along and passed a tow-rope. Frank had no money but he was grateful and he gave the skipper his wrist-watch.

“Foolish people believe an ocean passage is full of hazards,” Frank went on. “At sea we had nothing to worry about as a rule. In the wild weather we tucked her head under her wing and went below and slept. The sea never betrays you unless you’re a fool or your ship’s rotten. Ships were made for the sea, not for the land.”

No, the sea never betrayed Frank Wightman but the greatest creature of the sea almost overwhelmed him during one coastal passage. The whale came up from the depths in a long slanting drive that lifted the huge bulk almost clear of the surface. The waters spread out angrily against the running seas. A plume of vapour grew as the great lungs emptied with a rushing sound, melancholy and vast. Then the turmoil of arrival subsided and the whale lay beside *Wylo*, immense and

menacing. Frank breathed the very tang of the whale’s breath in his nostrils. For an hour the whale played round *Wylo*, scrutinising the peculiar object on his world of the sea. Frank said it was like gazing into an eye on the side of a wall. The whale stared at Frank and Frank gazed back. Suddenly the yacht rolled deeply and on the return the sails filled with a loud report. The whale went into the depths with a snarling plunge, the sea racing up the high, tapering shaft of the body. In a storm of bubbles and a blue smother the great shadow went boring smoothly to the depths.

Frank estimated that he rowed four hundred miles or more a year during his time in Kraal Bay; four hundred miles to and fro across the lagoon to Oesterval and Langebaan or down to

the well at Bossieskraal. At first he paddled the kayak. Then he had a nondescript dinghy of no special merit. His last boat was a dory, a miniature Grand Banks dory of the type used by generations of line fishermen.

Frank built the dory himself within a few days at a cost of less than ten pounds. She was a ten-footer, double-ended, with flared topsides, wide enough for oars. Frank wrote after his first trip in her: "She is just back from her first five miles: across to the farm this morning, then down to Langebaan for a four-gallon tin of paraffin. Due to her buoyancy and liveliness I imagined she was slower than the old dinghy, so I noted the time when I landed on the beach at the farm. It was fifty minutes, under the most adverse conditions. Fifty minutes was the best

time I ever did in the old dink in the most favourable conditions."

CHAPTER 15

WRITING AND READING

*Most people regard loneliness as
undesirable.*

*The majority crave contact and
affection.*

*Most solitary people have loneliness
thrust upon them,
but there are some who achieve it.*

*Being on
their own is a shield, guarding against
the
intrusion of others into their lives and
thoughts.*

NEIL KESSEL

AMONG THE secrets of Frank Wightman's survival in solitude was his love of letter-writing. Some of his nights might have been boring without his typewriter; his expert fingers raced over the keyboard and he called it "talking to my friends." It was done without effort, a legacy of his cable

days when he had learnt to use a typewriter with such great skill that he had become unconscious of the machine. When he played on the typewriter he might have been caressing the keys of a piano.

One day in the city he tried an electric typewriter. He called it an abomination. "You touch a key - there is an explosion," said Frank. "The carriage jerks and the typewriter almost leaps off the table." Frank had a small portable machine on board *Wylo*; but when he was typing the manuscript of one of his books he borrowed a delightful old museum-piece, an office typewriter which he described as "an old Rolls Royce of a machine." He said it was as slow as the mills of God but just as precise; the size of a wardrobe, but a gem. He typed over one hundred thousand words on it, his

eyes always on the page, listening to the soft clicks.

Frank wrote easily to his friends because he allowed the phrases to flow out of his mind without having to face them in print.³⁴ Year after year I tried to persuade him to write a book describing his life on the lagoon; but he told me that he encountered problems he could not solve. As I have noted, his second book did not achieve anything like the success of the first.

³⁴ Frank wrote regularly to Mr. John O. Thornton, one of his cable service friends, from 1920 until he was taken ill in 1967. After Frank's death Mr. Thornton wrote to me: "Frank was certainly a wonderful letter-writer. He had no fear of anything or anybody and I never saw him lose his temper. He was always ready to laugh. He ate and drank sparingly. We were so different that it is surprising that we remained on such good terms."

He was a perfectionist, a stern critic of his own work. Frank also enjoyed some of the reviews of his books, and he often chuckled and repeated one which ran as follows: "It takes more than daring and an eye for beauty to make a writer. Frank Wightman should take as much time scrubbing the purple passages from his prose as he does barnacles from his yacht." But he differed, rightly, from a magazine editor who gave him this poor advice: "Please omit airing your personal philosophy of getting away from it all. So many people might like to but they can't and emphasis just hurts and turns them sour." Frank replied: "When I was so strong on contrasting the city with the life at sea I had imagined I was pleasing the reader. Pleasing him by that contrast. I had imagined he would be able to step outside himself,

at least for the duration of the tale, and experience with me an escape. Did he really think I was jeering at him when I condemned the city?"

"In a coldly academic way I can see my life here as remarkable," Frank once told me. "But one must also feel it as such before the story can be told. The mere recital of the incidents and surroundings of such a life would not claim the reader. Without conviction of merit, would the mere writing, the tricks and devices, make good the deficiency? Priestley contrasted writing and readability. De Maupassant declared: 'It's all in the manner of telling.' I don't know. Often on top of Constable Hill I have lived again for a spell through my first emotions on coming to the lagoon. It was an unforgettable sensation. Feeling like that it would have been impossible not

to have written a compelling chapter. At certain moments in my life here something has had the impact of dynamite and I have been prompted to write the tale. Things one remembers in minutest detail. At such moments one lives with an intensity seldom granted in the city. The city gives you few high moments, if any. It gives the soporific safety of routine; this gesture, that result, ad nauseam. This life, if one registers, is rich in impacts; I don't know why. Perhaps it is a case of civilised man going back to his ancestors. If only I had the imaginative power to contrast the reaction of Stone Age Man to any given thing - with mine! Then I could write a book. To them, no doubt, this life was as exacting and unrewarding as the life of the city is to civilised man."

Frank went on writing but he was painfully aware of the plod-plod-plod of the feet of his muse. He studied Denton Welch, a writer who made even the chores of life interesting; a writer touched by the light that never was on land or sea. "It is magic, but I cannot see how he does it," Frank confessed. "It is some device of writing - but which? Life is a platitude and even if you lived on the moon it would become a platitude after a spell. It is in imagination that we go adventuring. Now the only thing which could give my lagoon book continuity, the string on which the beads of descriptive writing are strung, is my daily existence here. Is that going to be enough to hold the book together? Denton Welch made little daily occurrences arresting by some

magic which is his very own. I'm sure I haven't got it."

On his rare visits to the city Frank usually had dinner with me. He spoke gratefully of my flat with its soft lights, its warmth and sophisticated comfort. Yet he hated to leave the lagoon. "I do seem to have discovered something, though God knows what it is," he said. "When I'm in your flat I love it, yet some odd readjustment takes place when I get back. Sixteen Mile Beach is roaring. The lagoon is jade. The sky is amber. A flight of Arctic terns is passing over Wylo, stroking the air and calling, calling, calling. For me it is enough. There are values and values. Is man equipped to find the value? Now that I'm a pensioner, a public liability, I'm looking forward to the enchantment of winter on the lagoon. I have a sound

mooring, a good anchorage and home-made bread. To come to town is to surrender oneself to the profundities of commercial radio, to the pushing crowds, the idiotic urgency, to the rat race. The lagoon weather is so lovely, the peace so all-embracing. A jaunt to town is exciting for about three days; then I start thinking of *Wylo* and the lagoon. At least this demonstrates that I have at last declared for the life that is mine, inescapably.”

He wrote three hundred words a day and more often than not he threw his day’s output into the lagoon. When the first draft of his lagoon book was finished he put it aside for two months, then burnt the manuscript without showing it to me. “While I am writing I often have convictions of quality,” said Frank. “These are seldom confirmed when I read it. I

allowed a book which I instinctively distrusted to be published - ‘*Wylo Sails Again*’ - and I have not got over the horror of it. That will not happen with the lagoon book. Even if I write a version that pleases me I do not know that I shall allow it to go to a publisher. One cannot live forever on the proceeds of one book. I shall not disturb the tranquillity my pension has brought me.”

Fifteen years after the publication of “The Wind is Free” he read parts of it again. He told me that he flushed with embarrassment and sighed at the chances he had missed. Soon afterwards (so he told me) he made a bonfire on the beach and destroyed all his manuscripts and letters: He had kept a full record of lagoon impressions and happenings for many years and these diaries also went into the

flames. His lagoon book of one hundred thousand words, and two carbon copies, were among the manuscripts flung on to the fire. A fourth copy, sent to Graham Young, had been lost in the post. I was never permitted to see the lagoon book. Frank probably had in mind those misguided people who had spread the story that I had written "The Wind is Free" for him. He wanted no further help of any kind. I wish that I could have read the book he sacrificed on that lonely beach.

"When I write I see the reader sitting opposite me," explained Frank after the regrettable Kraal Bay bonfire. "I'm watching his eyes. You know, you've got to hold those eyes. If you feel you are losing his attention you delve into your memory and present him with something else to recapture him. You

have to do it quietly. I wish that I could do it, but I'm not a writer and I hate my writing. People say it's good but I hate it. I just get red in the face and I cannot read it. If I wanted to write I might be able to do it but I do not want to write any more. Writing has served its purpose as far as I am concerned. 'The Wind is Free' brought in eight hundred pounds and I got my boat back. Writing can be a catharsis; you get something out of your system. When we crossed the ocean in *Wylo* there were times when we were very unhappy. Graham Young read the book and said to me: 'I don't know how you could falsify the thing so much - not the episodes but our reactions'. I did that deliberately. I wanted to rid my system of hatred of the sea so that I could go on sailing.

My writing has served a purpose and now I have finished.”

Writing filled many of Frank Wightman's nights but I think he preferred reading. He read slowly, savouring every line of some papers and books. “One of the riches that come to you from dearth”, he called it. He was enormously grateful to me for sending him the “New Statesman” every week for many years. Once he had paid for this critical weekly but the time came when he could no longer afford it. “It was a deprivation I felt more than any of the other economies I made at that time,” Frank declared.

I also sent him other London papers, especially the “Sunday Times”. He would acknowledge a bundle of newspapers in ecstatic terms. “Exalt

you to high heaven for the blessed papers,” he would say. “I am interested in the big scene of the world and those papers do cover a wide field.” After Frank left the cable service he always took in the papers he had enjoyed in the cable messes during the war years - the “New Statesman” and “Manchester Guardian”. He used to feel an alien in the mess because he could not relish “Punch” as the other cable men did. The “Englishry” of “Punch” was “a long call and a strong call that may not be denied” to those exiles. Often on the circuits on night duty he would hear the supervisor and his staff laughing over the latest Belcher joke. “Punch” saved them from “going dago”, a favourite term among them. They went to those enchanting South American countries buttoning their

Englishness round them. The longer they stayed the more English they became so that when their terms of servitude were over and they went back to the "Old Country" they were caricatures. The English were as foreign to them as they were to the English. In every large South American city there was an English community that published its own newspaper. These exiles spoke of 'foreigners' in a land where they themselves were foreign. Frank avoided those dreary circles and once heard himself explained: "He's not English, you know - he came from South Africa." This because he shunned the English social gatherings and had friends among the "dagoes".

The newspapers I sent kept Frank in touch with stage and ballet. He was indignant when a woman who

reviewed ballet for the "New Statesman" compared Golovine with Nijinski. "She is too young even to have seen Nijinski dance," Frank pointed out. "I saw all the giants of the Maryinski theatre who were contemporary with Nijinski and none of them could be compared with him except to their great detriment."

Always an event in the life of Frank Wightman was a new book by Graham Greene. The sardonic Wightman seldom had a word of criticism for the novelist he had known slightly during his schooldays. He did once point out to me how Graham Greene's stature had grown since 1939, when "The Confidential Agent" was published. Frank said Greene's early writing lacked that muted authority which later became famous. There was a sense of strain in the writing, as

though he could not achieve his effects easily. It was startling to watch Graham Greene stumbling; the man whose skill became legendary. His hand was so heavy, relatively, that the eager reader was there before him at each climax. "I admire Graham Greene for his theological daring" said Frank. "He has powers of persuasion which are his very own and I like to see him use them. If ever I get frightened enough to need a religion it will be Roman Catholicism. Graham Greene's priests are always the vehicle he uses to put forward his own secret convictions and he puts into their mouths all his incomparable eloquence and what he dare not say as a writer. It has always been my conviction that there must be something in Roman Catholicism if it can claim two scrutinising minds like Evelyn Waugh

and Greene. These two can see just what makes man behave as he does; the inordinate ambition wearing a fair face; the hidden fear; the crippling guilt; the 'charity' of a public figure which demands a mosaic of lesser lives against which it can disport itself with the maximum publicity." However, the genius of Waugh disappointed Frank when he bought "The Ordeal of Gilbert Pinfold". He was bored. The inimitable style was still there but the story dawdled and creaked. Waugh seemed to be losing his power. Frank declared that best-sellers were a form of art because they set forth the obvious extremely well; if they did not they would be beyond the appreciation of the masses. The people were types rather than characters and the masses could recognise types. Best-sellers also contained wit, a sense

of atmosphere and episode and skill in delaying action so that tension could mount. The author felt enthusiastic about his theme and conveyed it to the reader. "No best-seller has ever been literature and no literature was ever a best-seller", Frank concluded pontifically. I reminded him of his idol Graham Greene and for once he smiled and conceded the point. As a rule he defeated me in argument as easily as he had done in yacht races long ago.

"I think Somerset Maugham's fabulous success was due to his ability to write best-seller material with a cunning touch that convinced the masses that they were reading literature," Frank went on. "He was not profound but he was an acute observer of human nature. He reminds me of a priest who is a realist, using his priestly role to

preach heresy. From such a source heresy is always exciting. His craftsmanship is greater than art - it is superlative. I see him as a fabulous, industrious little insect with a mellifluous whistle. The note is so convincing that you forget he is saying nothing. To hell with style - to dazzle is enough. People love and welcome the marvellous."

There were few reference books in Frank's tiny library. He had a textbook on shorthand which he had bought in Trinidad after selling *Wylo*. "I wanted something to keep my mind off *Wylo* during the passage back to Cape Town in a slow old tramp," Frank explained. "She had an engine like a little sewing-machine and the bow-wave often ran ahead of her in the trades. I might have jumped over the side, thinking of what I had lost;

but I studied shorthand instead. When I was writing 'The Wind is Free' up on Table Mountain my ideas ran faster than my longhand so I wrote in shorthand. I was completely uncritical of language in those days. When I became critical I could not write any more."

Frank loved Fowler's "Dictionary of Modern English Usage." He said it was written in the style he was taught to admire at school; unhurried and urbane, so different from the hit-or-miss of modern journalism. He liked the way Fowler used words that had been robbed of their power by becoming 'journalese'. Fowler never groped or indulged in blundering paraphrases to capture a meaning once enshrined in one word.

"Reading is a blessed release to the open world, or another man's mind,

after a day of hard work," said Frank. "A book and the newspapers give adventure to the imagination while the stressed body rests. I think wonderful old Maugham was right. He was interviewed by someone who wanted him to commit himself on the prevailing cult of 'engagement'; the extent to which a writer should be involved in the contemporary scene. Maugham countered with his belief that a storyteller had one task, to tell a story. As simple and stark as that and he does it incomparably. I think the story counts. To hell with style. Style, like fashion, changes with the ages. Read the stylists of the past; those pagoda sentences which filled a page; that posturing and rodomontade. Emerson, Lamb, Paten, who reads them now? Only the student working for a degree."

Frank touched on many topics when we met but always he returned to the lagoon and his simple pleasures. A cup of tea on deck after a swim or a hard pull; a lovely effect of cloud; the mystery of mornings and evenings; the habits of fish living in the shadow of *Wylo* on warm days; endless speculation on the sea-wrack that drifts ashore on Sixteen Mile Beach. All sorts of occupations that would be considered a waste of time in the city. The return to the lagoon after a walk along the moonlit farm tracks, to the canoe hidden in the bushes. The whisper of water round the hull, the growl of the sea far off and a half moon reflected in the lagoon.

“If I won a large prize in a lottery I would hand the money over to friends in the city who need it and come back to my lagoon,” Frank declared. “On

the lagoon there are moments of intimate loveliness and astonishing significance - and you encounter them in tranquillity.”

CHAPTER 16

FAREWELL TO WYLO

*The city does not take away, neither
does the
country give solitude; solitude is within
us.*

JOSEPH ROUX

THREE O'CLOCK in the morning, a late March morning in 1965, and Frank Wightman dropped into his heavily-laden dory and rowed away from Wylo for the last time. He left her in the darkness with hardly a pang; but as the white shape grew dim and disappeared Frank called back: "Good luck!"

For three months Frank had been talking about leaving the lagoon. He had planned a Christmas visit to Cape Town but he wrote saying it was impossible. After a long south-east gale Wylo had sprung a leak and he

could not leave her. He had no idea of the cause; it might be nothing more than the caulking in the garboard strakes which had not been renewed for thirty years. Or the old ship might be coming apart structurally and that would mean virtually rebuilding her. It would take months and cost a hundred pounds and he would not consider it. "She was honestly constructed, and for that reason she is still afloat," Frank told me. "But I built her of pine and the pines do not last like mahogany, oak or teak. In the Wylo design the keel is the main member, and if the keel bolts have gone it will be a serious matter. It is impossible to decide until I haul her up on the slipway. I may have to put a match to her and give her a Viking funeral."

I drove up to see Frank several times at this period. As I expected, he had

done nothing about slipping the yacht. He was still thinking it over and there was no urgency as long as he remained on board and pumped her out every day. After the shrieking of the south-east gale the lagoon was mercifully calm. The birds that had taken flight before the savagery were back in their chiming multitudes; the sky was filled with stroking wings.

“I love the lagoon but I have loved it for a long time,” Frank told me one day. “Too long, perhaps. I begin to wonder whether my frail personality is destined to be cancelled out by the vast impersonality of this great sheet of water. As I grow older I often imagine living and sleeping within four walls, under a roof, on a floor that is always immovable. I could lie in bed at night and laugh at the weather. I could belong to a library and walk on

some beach for exercise - and read and read and read. It might work out in such a way that I shared a room with another old man who snored and insisted on all the windows being shut. Radios might blare all over the house. What then? I have been generously served by life and I have my memories. If I was unhappy I might start to write. I was happier writing than I have ever been since.”

Frank was nearing seventy, but even then the thought of going to sea again in *Wylø* lingered in his mind. He spoke of patching her up and sailing to the Bahamas, the three thousand islands. There he could write. He would give her new rigging and set out on the long passage. But he did not mean it. Very soon he was talking once more of leaving the lagoon. “I’m getting old,” said Frank. “Not in body but in

spirit. I'm less tolerant of hardship. I want tranquillity. I could turn in at night with the wind roaring outside and find pleasure in laughing at it. Here I lie in my bunk and wonder whether I shall have to get up. No, I've never broken adrift but I have had to get into the dinghy and put out a heavy anchor. It's happened often enough to be hateful. You get back aboard with your hands streaming with blood and the cuts take days to heal. This is a blustering climate. I've been its child for decades and now the ship is standing it better than I am, leak and all. People say I'm wonderful for my age but I am beginning to feel my age. My spirit is tired of living so close to Dame Nature, that loud-mouthed, white-faced old bitch. This is all right when you're young but I'm getting so sick of it. It's like being married to a

bitch with a voice that's too loud and a mouth that never stops talking. I've kept clear of women for that reason. They're mostly chicken-brained and loud-mouthed. The lagoon is like that. Beautiful but too loud. I shall often miss it but I shan't worry about that. Many and many a time I've been thrown out of my bunk. I've had to sleep on the cabin floor. I want to say good-bye to that. I've been forced out. Now you know."

Frank declared that after so many years he could say good-bye to the lagoon and never think of it again. He had exhausted the experience. It had become a rut, a habit, an infliction. He was repeating himself like an old alarm-clock that was ready to break down. He had always disliked certain aspects of the lagoon and now they were becoming deadly. He was on a

treadmill. He was too old to row four miles or walk four miles every time he needed a box of matches or a jar of water. I suggested that he might keep larger stocks on board but he said it was impossible. He had no refrigerator and he had to have fresh milk and fresh eggs. It was not like rowing on the Serpentine. He blew down to Langebaan in the dory last time he went to get his pension but he had to face bloody hard weather on the way back and he was rowing for more than three hours. He could not stop for a second or he would have been blown away. It had carried on at sixty miles an hour for days on end. The seas were travelling at seven knots by the time they hit *Wylo* and the shrouds were wailing like banshees. Spray was flying everywhere. It blew for

eighteen days and during all that time he could not collect his mail.

“On the lagoon you’re a creature of the elements,” Frank went on. “You make a plan but when it comes on to blow you have to abandon that plan - and do it with equanimity or you’ll have a nervous breakdown through frustration. Now that I’m old I get angry if I can’t have my way. The lagoon is like a love affair. You endure it for a time, you become sated with it and then the feeling of revulsion sets in. Wherever I go now I shall escape from this white-faced savagery. Here there is nothing to see but those white cliffs, those sand dunes. For most of the three hundred and sixty five days the seas are slapping round the hull. The winters are so short, the summers are so long. There are all those nights when the

boat is rolling about and you get no peace. The motion of *Wylo* in the open sea is different; the ocean is huge and when she is hove-to she rides slowly over the seas. Here you're moored and the boat is trapped by her moorings. Anything you oppose to the wind like a spar or a shroud sets up a howl, and I'm tired of that. This is a sun-bleached desolation without shade. Yes, it's lovely if you don't have to live with it. I've had too much of what you go to for release. Over the years the lagoon has given me a lot of satisfaction but even when I was younger I could see its faults. I could see the wretched exposure. Not a thumbnail of shade. You feel like an ant on a griddle. In the summer it is like someone holding a burning glass over you. When I was younger I put up with it because of the lovely

evenings, the lovely dawns. Now I am tired of cowering in the cabin, lying naked on the floor in the hot weather. Of course the city will be a contrast, a hell of a contrast. I shall often curse myself for leaving the lagoon. Up to now I have always been able to master these surroundings but now the lagoon is becoming an enemy. I've been conscious of loneliness all my life; not frightened by it but aware of it. I love meeting my friends and now I shall be able to see them more often. Oh, I've had a splendid life here, a better life than I've deserved, only I can't face another year of it. I knew this moment of decision would come. My *Wylo* is an old lady of the sea now. If she's rotten, if she's dying then I must help her out."

Frank landed me on the beach I knew so well, the curving Kraal Bay beach

where the bushes come down to the water. For the last time, I thought, for the last time. As we parted Frank remarked significantly: "Of course I may be making a mistake."

The old lady of the sea was not dying. A little caulking and her bilge was as dry as ever. Frank put her in the hands of a yacht broker and waited for buyers to arrive. Graham Young wrote urgently from New York. "I'll buy *Wylo* at any price you are offered," he said. "You are doing the wrong thing in leaving her. Try six months on shore and have the boat waiting for you if you don't like it."

Frank had made up his mind. He was in the cabin one day when he heard someone hailing him. A man had swum out to the yacht and now he clambered on board and announced

himself as a buyer. He was an archaeologist, he said, interested in the shell middens of the coast. He wanted to live on board and explore the dunes. Soon afterwards the broker sent Frank a cheque for three hundred and fifteen pounds. "The new owner would take over *Wylo* within a few days.

So Frank cleared out the lockers, the inaccessible corners he had not looked into for years. Old books, old drawings and photographs by Graham Young. He threw away teak planks and much other flotsam from Sixteen Mile Beach for he thought the new owner would like more space. He packed all his tools, a present for Llewellyn Thomas. The dory had been left out of the sale and Frank sold it separately. He filled the canvas kitbag he had used as a naval rating and found it was heavy on his shoulder.

When he carried his tools up to the road, to be stored in a cottage until he could take them to town, he felt his old inguinal hernia moving uneasily. Yes, he was too old for burdens.

Then he rowed over to Oesterval to buy milk and eggs for the last time. The farmer's wife told him that, by a coincidence, she too was leaving the lagoon to settle in town. Frank posted letters to all his scattered friends, giving them the Thomas address. He visited tile lagoon villages and shook hands with old acquaintances. He was touched, he told me, by the little gifts and the tearful farewells. One man gave him a bottle of sweet wine in a long-necked bottle, and there were jars of honey. "We'll miss you," they all said. "We'll miss you."

They would miss him. Over the years he had made sails for their boats,

sharpened their saws, advised them in many affairs beyond their ken. "How much?" they always asked, knowing that he would charge nothing. Frank saw himself becoming a legend among the lagooners of the future. " 'In the time of our forefathers there lived a strange man amongst us,' he chanted one day. 'He was ignorant of much our forefathers knew; the dangers of the open air outside our cottages; the evil of water on the body. Defying the wisdom of our forefathers he threw himself into the lagoon. And our forefathers and their kin stood watching. And behold, he thrust even his head beneath the waters.' Thus is history made, and much that we read is based on something as insubstantial as that."

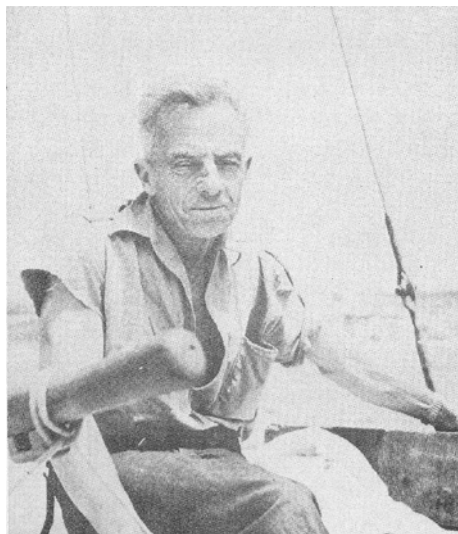
Each day *Wylo* floated higher on the water. Frank took his sextant and

compass and other instruments and stored them with friends in a lagoon village. He would have liked to have taken a picture by Graham Young, painted when his shipmate was eighteen years old, a ship under full sail; but it was painted on a deadlight that he did not dare to remove. At last *Wylo* floated like a bubble, higher than at any time since she had been ballasted after launching.

Someone offered Frank a cottage on the lagoon for one pound a month. He thought it over and refused. "I don't want to live among the lagooners any more," he told me. "I'm very fond of some of them but their horizons are so small. They are like islanders. The charm of my life on board *Wylo* was its complete isolation from what is called civilisation. I encountered the lagooners almost as a visitor from

outer space. The people in town have wider interests. But I'm not coming to town with the idea of finding my fulfilment in humanity. It's comfort I want - the joy of lying in bed and laughing at the wind. Sometimes in the Thomas home at Milnerton I have put down my book at midnight and switched off the light and listened to the roaring of the wind. I have put my head on the pillow and tried to stay awake so that I could enjoy the experience. I'm ending one emotional life and I'm starting another. I know the lagoon now. It was a dream when I first went there and in many ways the lagoon fulfilled the dream. But I shall not want to go back. I'll make the best of my new life. I don't think I shall ever want to see the lagoon again."

So at two o'clock on that March morning Frank Wightman threw off his blankets and dived over the side for the last time. It was beautifully mild in the water. He made his coffee for the last time, packed the last oddments and stowed everything in the dory. He needed a high tide at Bossieskraal to bring the loaded dory right up to the track on the beach; hence the early start. He was just about to set off when he saw a fishing boat in Kraal Bay. She had caught so many steenbras that she was down almost to her scuppers.³⁵ Frank bought eight of the fine six-pounders for Ina Thomas and cleaned them before he rowed away. He said it was an enchanted journey round the edge of the lagoon that night; a romantic fare-



“This is a sun-bleached desolation without shade,” said Frank. “Not a thumbnail of shade. You feel like an ant on a griddle.”

well and at the same time a reproach.

Llewellyn Thomas was waiting at Bossieskraal with his car and trailer. They lifted the dory on to the trailer

³⁵ See appendix: Steenbras.

and drove to Kraal Bay for the tools and heavy loads Frank had left in the quarry beside the road. It was too dark to see the white shape of *Wyllo* on the lagoon, mercifully dark. They turned and started for Cape Town before the dawn.

CHAPTER 17

CITY LIGHTS

*If the world lasts, men will probably
look back
on our civilisation with the same
distaste which
we reserve for the sanitation of the
Middle Ages
and the intolerance of the Inquisition.*

ERNLE BRADFORD

FRANK WIGHTMAN spent the first six weeks at the Thomas home, a guest once more of the “enduring Thomases”. It was not easy to find a room within his means. Day after day he studied the newspapers; once a week he came to dinner with me and spoke of his visits to suspicious landladies and dreary tenements. He smiled at each failure and was not dismayed.

“The place I’m in love with is somewhere up in the Gardens, so that I can walk down that marvellous Avenue every day,” Frank said. “In the town, shade is in a million places. Heat is more tolerable in the shade - or less intolerable. The heat of the lagoon with the blinding light became entirely insupportable. Now I want a room in one of those wee side-streets where you find remnants of the old Cape; where the old mansions stood. Some little side-alley with no traffic and lots of trees. With a little imagination you can look out over Table Bay and see the Dutch East India ships anchored before the Castle; yards squared, shallots bobbing astern. You can almost hear the saluting cannon of the ships, matched by the thunder of the Castle guns. When I leave my room for the library I shall pause under each

tree, exulting in the shade and staring up through the green luxuriance; and passers-by will think I am mad. I shall visit my friends, too, but not so often as to become a symbol of their routine for that's the way to get hated."

Frank found a room up on the mountainside in an unfashionable corner of the city. It was less picturesque than his dream and he had to walk some way before he came to his beloved oak avenue. I visited him there and was a little surprised to find that such rooms were still available at six pounds a month. It was tiny, smaller than a single cabin in a modern liner; but there was free electricity, a plug for a heater or kettle, a large basin with running water. Bathrooms and lavatories were clean. This was no slum in spite of the cabbage odour in the corridors.

Several tenants had telephones. All of them seemed to relish the ferocious radios Frank detested. Frank closed his door and the irritations became more tolerable. His view was a blank wall but he had his books. I told him that the unshaded light above his head reminded me of a man under observation in the condemned cell; and I gave him a reading-lamp. He would have made the best of that glaring bulb if I had not done so. It was hot and noisy in the room and cars screeched past at sixty miles an hour.

"Frank, you'll have to leave here before summer comes again," I told him.

"Yes, probably. I shall live in the Avenue and the Gardens and just sleep here. The main streams of human thought are now open to me, newspapers and books. I love the aroma of

the oaks as I walk down to that dear old library - it is like swimming under water in a green world. I have compiled a library list. One of the librarians who knew me when I was in my twenties, a pleasant and helpful woman, recognised me the other day and remarked: 'Same tastes I see, Mr. Wightman.' After forty years! The tale has come full circle. I am reading again the logs kept by the young commanders of fast brigs when they hunted the slavers in West African waters. I've read again the autobiography of Sir William Simmonds, the man who designed those wonderful craft. He entered the navy with completely new ideas of design just when sail was giving way to steam - alas! I've read Mahan's 'Influence of Sea Power upon History', dealing with the period when

Britain was alone and facing Napoleon's power in Europe. I've read Admiral John St. Vincent's diaries and his letters to his wife while he was in command of the English fleet blockading the French and Spanish ports through bitter winters. Thanks to corruption in English shipyards his ships were ill-found and rotten. I've read Cochrane's logs, the brilliant tactician under sail, the man who matched his frigate against a French ship of the line and took her; he could not out-gun her so he outmanoeuvred her, placing his frigate on her quarter so that his broadside could bear while the Frenchman could not reply. I've read 'A Cruising Voyage Round the World' by Woodes Rogers, the man who took the Acapulco galleon and landed in England with the treasure; a pirate who became governor of Nassau

and stamped out piracy. I once saw the tree where he strung them up. That's what I've read for the second time in my life, and the world's literature is still waiting for me."

Frank had various names for his room. It was a slum, a cell, a telephone booth, a little hole, a cupboard. "I'm not fond of my cupboard - or those frustrated women who rush down the passage every time they hear a man's voice," said Frank. "They're dreadful, really - old people in a little rut, some of them daft. They have silly phobias and idiotic moments. One of them told me: 'There's a woman listening to my telephone conversations, always listening.' I tried to explain that the lines must have been crossed but she would not believe me. She's been in that place for twelve years. I hear those women grunting away to each

other; then a man comes in and their voices become light and provocative and I hear peals of girlish laughter. They get on each other's nerves and each one tells me how she's avoiding the other. Everyone is afraid of fresh air and with doors and windows shut the place is like a Turkish bath. Those women invite me to tea - they're lonely. Well, I've got what I have. It will pass. Everything passes."

Always Frank was a helpful person in the surroundings he had chosen. When a fuse blew or a tap leaked they appealed to Frank and he repaired it. One day he was called by an old man in the next room, a man who smoked all day. Frank raised him in his bed and saw that he was dying. A woman looked in as the old man died. Then she tore down the passage, banging at

all the doors, telling everyone the news.

Frank repelled those who tried to invade his privacy but he was patient and gentle; he stood at his door and listened. They were not invited to enter. "I'm not fussy about a room," Frank declared. "But this room is so small that if I want to cut a slice of bread I have to put the platter on the bed. There's not even a little table. But what is a room in the great mosaic of life? A room is nothing. Life remains to be explored. I shut my door and read and the reading keeps me going. I never think about my room. It's only when you think that a situation becomes intolerable."

Of course the tranquillity of the Cape Town botanic gardens, the old vegetable patch of the Dutch Company, fascinated Frank Wightman

and gave him the shade he desired. I knew exactly where to find him, in the herb garden designed so that blind people could enjoy the fragrance of plants they could not see. He said that in the early morning it was like the Amazonian forest. Frank wandered among the roses but he was also aware of human weeds in this sanctuary in the city. Here were vagrants of all sorts, men who eyed each passer-by speculatively wondering whether they could take the risk of asking for the price of a bottle of wine. Female alcoholics sat apart, obsessed with the same idea, the ways and means by which the next bottle might be procured. Frank saw one of the white male vagrants trying to wheedle money from a coloured gardener. On an impulse Frank beckoned to the man and gave him a coin.

“I can get drunk on this,” announced the vagrant in tones of relief.

“And afterwards?”

“There’s no afterwards for me - there’s only now. You’d be surprised how many suckers there are.” He turned to Frank and made a little bow. Frank talked to the man for an hour and was never bored. The vagrant was a queer mixture of servility and impudence, undeserving of sympathy of any sort. He sized up Frank correctly and countered everything Frank said. “I wanted to see whether the man fitted in with my memories of vagrants I had met long ago,” Frank explained. “This man was a perfect example of a type that never changes. He was not interested in me at all - I was merely a sucker. I might have been in the Old Kent Road talking to a thirsty beggar outside a pub.”

As a contrast Frank sauntered round Table Bay Docks. He loved watching the tugs, for the skippers judged every movement to an inch; they made their little ships dance and spin and go sideways. Grand watermen! Sometimes he climbed Table Mountain, making his way up the precipices. Frank had no use for nailed boots and huge rucksacks. He tackled some climbs barefooted with his rubber-soled shoes in his pocket. Often he walked for hours in the Devil’s Peak pine forests, where he had taken his pad and pencil and written “The Wind is Free”.

“Those were wonderful days, writing on the mountain, fighting with all those images,” Frank recalled. “I could not do it now. I’ve become too self-conscious about writing. A lot of it was crude but it had the harsh impact

of something that had to come out. Now I've raised my standards and the fire has died."

Towards the end of the year 1965 I noticed a change in Frank Wightman. He declared that he never thought about *Wylo* and he had finished with his life on the lagoon. Life beside the lagoon would be a different matter entirely.

"What next?" I inquired.

"What next? I'll meet it when it comes. I never engineer anything. One day there will be an end to this episode of my room in the city. Meanwhile I live in the present. Those who live in the future are always confounded. This is all experience and all experience is interesting, especially when it isn't easy. Then you've got to adapt yourself. I've done that."

Nevertheless it was clear that Frank wished to move on. "Impersonality is what I want in a lodging," he remarked. "Many of the people at my place drink a lot. There is a cupboard in the hall where the charwoman keeps her bits and pieces and there she puts the empty bottles. I counted fifty bottles on the shelf the other day; mainly wine, with a few brandy bottles. At ten this morning a woman was giggling and floundering in the passage outside my door, looking for her key. She was drunk at that hour. Just imagine coming back to your room in that state on a hot day and suffering from a hangover. Poor bitch! Those people are capable of loneliness - you can tell that by the way they gossip across the passage. I'm an outcast. I had to stop them standing at my door and telling me their life

stories. I froze them off. Not by being rude - I just did not reciprocate. They leave me alone now.”

Then there was the cost of living. On the lagoon Frank had saved so much out of his pension that he was able to live like a sailor on the spree during his rare Cape Town visits. Now there was nothing over. He needed clothes. He went everywhere on foot; yet he could only just come out on his pension. He lived on milk, bread and cheese; a diet which freed him from cleaning up afterwards. Yet this austere hermit who regarded food as a tyranny and a bore confessed to me that he sometimes found himself thinking wistfully of the meals he had eaten in the cottages of the lagooners. He remembered the freshness of their fish dishes; the harders grilled over hot ashes; the bokkoms eaten like fish

biltong; the wonderful pickled fish. As a rule he did not like highly-seasoned foods but their curries were delectable. Yet he was still firm in his belief that he had made the right decision when he sold *Wylo*. The buyer had sold her again at more than twice the amount Frank had received; but it did not matter, he would have taken fifty pounds for *Wylo* because he was sick of what he was doing.

“I would not go back to *Wylo* now if she was given to me,” Frank asserted. “Those were enchanting years but I would not go back. When an experience has been bled white and you go on living with it then you are living with death. I sleep better here in town than I did on board *Wylo*. When the wind was screaming in the rigging I used to say to myself angrily: ‘Oh for three minutes silence.’ For all those

years I was longing for stillness. One night I sat up in my bunk with *Wylo* bucketing in a breeze and I said: 'Look here, I've had enough of this.' Yet I went on for another couple of years before I knew that the time had come to leave. I'm not blaming the lagoon. The lagoon will go on long after I'm dead. I had simply exhausted my capacity to respond to it. It's like a marriage that enthrals you; it seems that the glamour will last forever. Then you find she's empty and trashy and shallow. Some men go on long after they realise their mistake. It's difficult to think of the lagoon exactly like that but it was an emotional episode and I loved it for years. In my life I have always left episodes when they exhausted themselves - when there was nothing more to learn. The life on *Wylo* gave me imperishable

memories which I shall hold till I die. But I came to a moment when I was no longer involved."

I reminded Frank of the daily ecstasy he found in diving over the side. Once at Kraal Bay he was dressed and sitting in my car, ready for the drive to town. "Give me a few minutes," he pleaded. "I must have one more swim." And he slipped out of his clothes in the bushes, ran into the shallows, plunged and struck out for deep water. It was not a swim, it was ecstasy. "Yes, that is a luxury I miss," Frank admitted. "But the sea is still there. I've probably made the change too late. Perhaps the city has defeated me. Man has never been master of his fate. If I've been defeated the experience will be interesting. When you cease to welcome experience you're dead. Many men die when

they're about thirty though they may be buried in their seventies. They were afraid to experience any more. They went into the House of Life, drew the blinds and locked the door and lived in the past. Very few of them had any past at thirty. 'Whom the gods love die young.' That really means young in spirit. I shall turn the page over and whatever the next page has to reveal I shall take it. Things that repel you at the moment often lead to something extremely rich."

I asked Frank whether he had anything in mind. "A room in an outhouse with trees round it, within a few yards of the lagoon," Frank replied. "I love the sound of the wind in the trees. You know, it's different when it blows through foliage. I would cultivate the land, live among the wildflowers, drink my coffee and meditate. I've

meditated before, but not so close to the earth as that. Meditation is not the same everywhere. The sea knows nothing of man but the earth loves him if he serves her. The earth is kindly to man, unlike the raging sea. Yes, I would grow my own vegetables. People of my age cannot see oak-trees come up but they can plant vegetables. That would be a wonderful end, you know, to go back to one's origins - the primitive man, close to the land from which we sprung and which eventually claims us. We belong to the land, we are creatures of the land, ashes to ashes and dust to dust. I loved to step on shore from *Wylo* when I was cruising. One day I walked into a forest on a tropical island and my heart was singing. I hated civilisation but I yearned for the land after a long spell at sea. Now I want to go back to the

peasantry. I shall buy overalls and a pair of *velskoene*,³⁶ rubber gloves for pulling out thorn-bushes. I shall work all day on the land until I am dead tired; then I'll have my bread and butter and read in bed. No bouncing about. I want to hear the call of the avocets again. There I can grow old. I'd like it."

"You'll miss the library, Frank."

"I have lived with books for nearly a year and I have exhausted the desire to use the world's literature any longer. I've become saturated. Now I want to turn over another page of life."

By chance I met a man in the street soon after Frank reached that decision. He was part owner of an estate beside the lagoon; he knew Frank well, and

Frank knew the estate. The outhouse surrounded by trees was on that old farm and that was the vision in Frank's mind. "Frank would like to go back to the lagoon," I said. "Tell him to come and see me."

³⁶ See appendix: Velskoene.

CHAPTER 18

RETURN TO THE LAGOON

*Deliverance will not come from the
rushing,
noisy centres of civilisation. It will
come from
the lonely places.*

FRIDTJOF NANSEN.

FEBRUARY 12, 1966. After almost a year in the city Frank Wightman returned to the lagoon. His benefactor was Brian Lello, a journalist with a sailing record equal to Frank's own achievements; for Lello had sailed from Durban to the West Indies between the wars in a yacht smaller than *Wylo*.³⁷ A most hospitable man, Lello had taken Frank into his home for some months at a time when Frank was trying to write his second book.

He knew Frank's foibles and admired his intellect and he was glad to have him as caretaker at Oesterval.

Oesterval is probably the oldest farm on the shores of Saldanha Bay. The boundary fence is within a few minute's walk of the farmhouse Frank had visited over the years for his milk and vegetables. Oesterval was the home of the Van Breda family for many years. When it came on the market in 1961, Brian Lello formed a proprietary company and bought it for £3,400. Among his partners were a baronet³⁸ and a medical professor. They restored the old buildings with great skill and turned the estate into a nature reserve.

³⁷ See appendix: Lello, Brian.

³⁸ See appendix: Milner, Sir Mordaunt.

“I am happier than I have any right to be at my age,” Frank told me soon after he had settled at Oesterval. “This is too good to be true. All day I am at work in the open and I sleep like a log at night.” Frank loved Oesterval under a full moon. He said the old buildings lay dreaming in a light that was submarine, the sort of lambent glow revealed by swimming under water. The low, pale buildings clutched the earth as though they feared the night, their walls like the cheeks of a corpse. Through the storming clouds the moon scudded giddily.

Frank found the estate overrun with *dubbeltjies*, a tough thorn bush, hard to eradicate. He tore out the bushes and burnt the seeds. “You need clogs to walk here,” he told me. “I have to go for those bushes tooth and nail and bludgeon them off the landscape. Ten

a day is good going.” There were rooikrans trees to cut down, fences to be repaired. He liked bending down as he weeded the flowerbeds. Frank tended a windmill that filled a large tank on a rise; and he carried pails of water from a well to many trees and plants. After a fortnight’s work he made a bonfire of weeds. He said the smoke was so dense and rose so high that it might have been seen in Cape Town. His face was tanned again. Late in March a little rain fell, washing the foliage, giving Frank a new and sparkling world. The veld responded with an aromatic hallelujah chorus that drenched his room while he slept. Outside his door the lagoon whispered: “You thought you would escape ... you thought you would escape.”

Early in the morning he walked to the post office, so early that the sun was just topping the far skyline. He walked in a world of primeval shadows while a company of partridges raced on the path before him. Their feet scarred the sands like the broad arrows on a convict's back. At each bend they froze, darting their heads from side to side; then with a fusillade of wing beats they took off in a low dipping flight over the shadowed veld.

Frank had been asked to sow a huge packet of wildflowers in the graveyard on the farm. A shower came at sunset. He lit a lantern and seized a garden fork; with the gentle rain falling on him he scattered the seeds and sowed. As he walked back to his room, wet but content, garden fork over his shoulder, he recited Stevenson's poem: "Home is the sailor, home from

the sea, And the hunter home from the hill." He was fulfilled. A week later the copious rains came, the seeds sprouted brightly. Like the land, Frank's heart rejoiced. Then the flamingos came back, as though to welcome Frank on his return to the lagoon. They came in a flight of, perhaps, five hundred birds, dipping low from a great height in the north, skimming the water in a smother of crimson and black, like flames seen through smoke. Not a wing beat as they fled past with a sound like a gale in the pines; each bird poised on his wings. They touched down on a lagoon beach, the flawless cavalcade broken as the great wings tilted for the landing, the long legs coming down to claim the earth. Each bird went bouncing forward in high, smooth, dreamlike strides to stand at last in the

posture that has inspired artists through the ages. Frank woke in the early hours and heard the voices of the



Oesterval is probably the oldest farm on the shores of Saldanha Bay. Frank Wightman at the well.

flamingos. He prayed that the lagooners would sleep soundly for he remembered their words: “Dey werry goot eetin, Missur Warpmunk.”

One night of torrential rain brought out the frogs. Frank stood in his doorway, sparks of water and hail striking his face, and listened to the thanksgiving chorus. “Hewp-hoick-tangle-tonk,” sounded the million voices; and the chorus was repeated swiftly and softly many times. “Hewp-hoick-tangle-tonk.” Frank had been sensitive to voices from birth, but he said it was not a happy destiny in an age of radio and yelling conversation.³⁹

Frank had no electricity, nothing but a hurricane lamp in his room. I visited him in March and gave him a modern,

incandescent lamp burning paraffin and providing a kindly yet brilliant light. When he was in the city I had presented him with the electric reading lamp because I felt that a man of his attainments should be able to read with ease at all times. On board *Wyllo* he had used a pressure lamp, efficient but noisy. Frank lit the new lamp and studied it. “This is beyond praise, beyond compare,” he declared. “It is not snoring.” I think the lamp was the only luxurious item in that old, beamed room in the farm coach house. It was a large room with one window and half-doors. An artist would have made something of it. I saw a single-bed, an aged sofa with the stuffing coming out, a barrack-room table and chair and a decayed leather arm-chair that might have been used by an early Van Breda. Frank cooked on a

³⁹ See appendix: Wightman, Cecil.

pressure stove. Outside his door there was a hollow bush where a cat had recently eaten a seagull.

I was seeing the farm again after more than thirty years. Captain Christian King had lived there between the wars, a retired master mariner who had spent his last years making ship models. Now the group of houses had been restored, more trees had been planted; a bell from the wrecked S.S. *Thermopylae* hung there and Brian Lello had placed a heavy old-fashioned anchor outside his quarters. The main building was like a Tudor cottage inside, but with a tiled shower and flush sanitation. This was a picturesque group of white buildings, unspoilt, a return to the eighteenth century. I noticed olive trees and amaryllis lilies transplanted from the neighbouring hills. No longer could

Frank complain of feeling like an ant on a griddle. There was shade and grass. He could touch with light fingers the face of the earth.

While I was there a raft passed slowly along the edge of the lagoon. It was something new to me; men collecting seaweed for industrial purposes from the lagoon beaches. They used drags and hauled the weed from the sandbanks. Frank disapproved and said the fishermen were protesting. Fish deposited their spawn in the weed. Moreover, the weed bound the sandbanks, and if the banks washed into the channels the whole geography of the lagoon would be changed and it would become a shallow vlei.

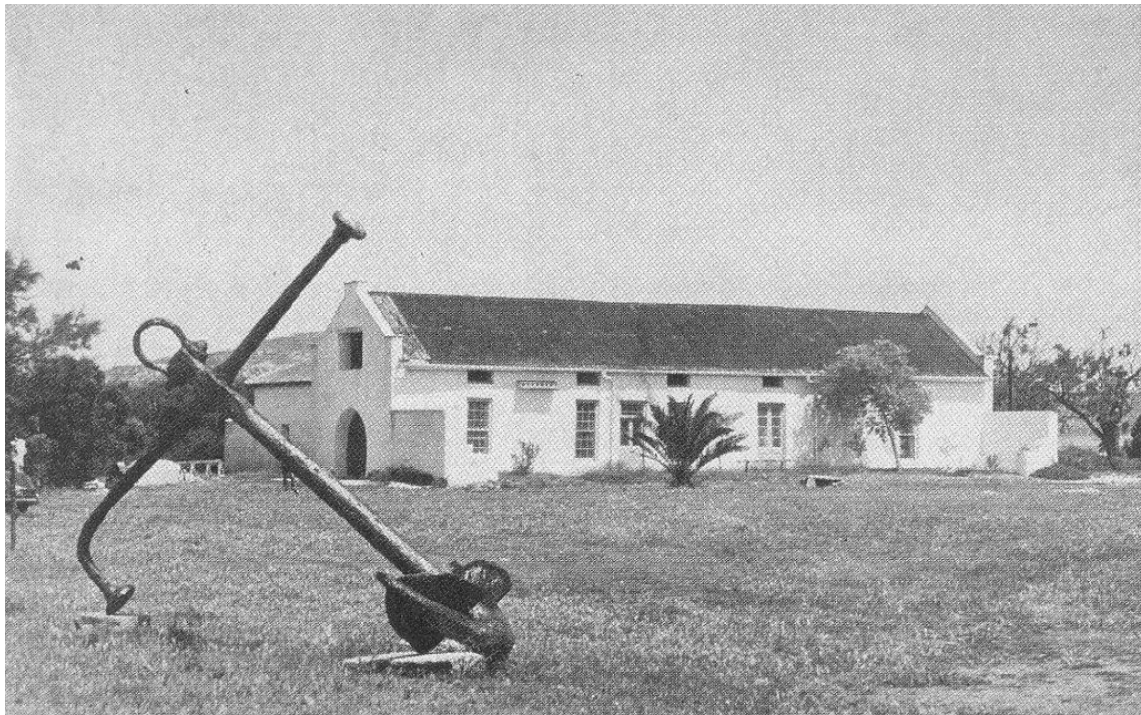
Frank was not alone on the Oesterval property. Near the gate lived an old coloured crone with one yellow fang and a pipe. Rachel was her name and

she tottered about the farm holding a staff and singing hymns. Brian Lello had once sown the old dorsvloer, the threshing-floor, with chinchinchees, Namaqualand daisies and other wild-flowers.⁴⁰ They came up, a ravishing display. Rachel weeded them out in his absence, certain that she was doing the right thing. She was afraid of a spectral dog, a sort of hound of the Baskervilles that Frank was unable to see by day or by night. I gathered that Frank loved the Oesterval nights. On board *Wylo* he had known the land mainly by day; this was almost a new experience. He stood often with molten silver lapping the invisible sands while from the darkness came the chiming call of the avocets. Far away across the lagoon he could see a

light glowing in a cottage window at Bossieskraal; a lamp similar to his own in the home of Carrie Smuts. In the night sky he fancied that he could see the fiery spokes of Dassen Island lighthouse whirling a double gleam every thirty-five seconds. The distant growl of surf reminded him of *Wylo* running bravely with nimble heels in the great seas with two men on board, their hearts in their mouths.

When he slept badly he would get up and stand outside in his pyjamas. Once there was the mysterious tapping of the big drops of a thunder shower and he listened to his friends the frogs gonging to each other. Little frogs in the foreground went “klink-klinkle-klink”. Large frogs answered with their “kloing-klang-kloing”. The white walls of the buildings were ghostly, their shuttered windows like closed

⁴⁰ See appendix: Dorsvloer.



“Brian Lello had placed a huge, old-fashioned anchor outside his quarters ... This was a picturesque group of white buildings at Oesterval, unspoilt, a return to the eighteenth century.”

eyes. In the rifts of the racing clouds the moon sped backwards. Drops pattered on the iron roof of his room like a typist's fingers. The triumph of the frogs went on and on. Suddenly a gust of fragrance came from the dark veld. The leaning tamarisks sighed and a pelt of rain struck him where he stood. He stripped and walked naked round the building, warm rain stroking his skin while the song of the frogs rose to a crescendo of thanksgiving. At half past three in the morning, cleansed and thrilled, he thrust his body into the blankets and burrowed deep. It was the life he loved.

"It is odd that all that is vivid in my life owes nothing to wealth," Frank remarked to me one day. "My experiences in the cable service, the Congo, the *Birkdale*, my own *Wylo*, all these filled a life which started at

eighteen. Yet I was never independent in the money sense. I am a bit puzzled by this. My young life was dominated by a father who never tired of assuring me that if I did not apply myself I would never be independent. And what is independence? Now I can see what my father could not see. You must take life by the throat with all that that implies. You must not be afraid to venture. Although I am seventy I have remained indifferent to a settled pattern of life. I find to my surprise that I can live on six pounds a month up here; that is, when I do not have to buy clothes or a stove."

Frank's inescapable essentials were whole-meal bread, butter, cheese, coffee, sugar and milk, and he smoked cigarettes at the rate of five a day. He smoked only in the evening when he was typing letters. Paraffin was

another necessity; the silent lamp I gave him consumed one and a half pints in eight hours. "No complaints there," Frank added. "I never use the noisy pressure lamp I had on board *Wylo*. And how I seek and adore silence as I progress to the grave."

Oesterval had its quota of wild life but Frank was surprised to discover an old *rooikat* living there on this tame side of the lagoon. It was a large specimen, behaving more like a lynx than the Constable Hill family. All fangs and claws, the terror of the veld. Frank watched it, sleek and well-fed, moving daintily over dried grass, twigs and leaves that would have betrayed any other animal. One day Frank drove a flock of sheep off the estate and disturbed some pheasants. They rose with the usual clatter of wing and voice and vanished over a rise. As

Frank topped the rise he paused and looked round. The pheasants had settled in a hollow and were poking about like farmyard poultry, keeping up their silly conversation: "Croop-croop-croop." Then the lynx reappeared, his body so low on the ground that he seemed to be moving on castors. He thrust forward and watched, a large bush masking his approach. Scent and hearing guided him. Then he edged cautiously to the point where his field would be clear for the charge. With his ears flat aback he was like a log. "Croop-croop-croop" went the pheasants. The lynx still waited and Frank felt the suspense. When the lynx charged he must have used all his claws, for the sand flew back. He had twenty feet to cover to his kill. The pheasant he had chosen took off at right angles to the

lynx's run. The lynx banked steeply and leapt. It was a superb leap. Frank saw the whole belly of the lynx as it streaked aloft with fore-legs outstretched. The flock rose and spread in pandemonium but the lynx and his victim came down with shrieking protests from the pheasant. For a moment there was a scuffle in a small cloud of dust. Then all sounds ended. Frank wondered where and how the lynx would start on its feathery meal.

“To live with the call of the birds and the faraway crashing of the sea and the smell of the good earth is a rich life,” Frank assured me at this time. “As I work on the estate my mind goes back peacefully to some old memory and I explore it anew. I have travelled light since I started to think. My load of memories has no cords tugging at my

back. I am enriched by all that life can give. A favourite occupation of mine is to develop some theme and then create an invisible opponent to refute it; he is urbane and well-mannered and does not shout me down. At the same time I keep my aged spine supple, bending and straightening, bending and straightening over the weeds. The hours fly, the days fly and all are filled.”

One night Frank was patrolling the estate. He had a torch with a beam like a searchlight but he walked in darkness to surprise possible housebreakers or game poachers. By accident he trod on a small mole and killed it. He was thinking of snakes and as his foot came down of the softness his brain told him: “This is it! Now I shall feel the fangs in my leg.” In the morning he went back to look at

the little thing and picked it up. The skin was of unimaginable softness and fineness. He had never handled anything so silken. And suddenly he remembered the moleskin trousers of the gamekeeper in Perthshire. It was a marvellous winter that year and Frank thought he was seeing the veld as he had never known it before. Wheat five feet high rearing out of flaming poppies with petals like saucers; like an explosion of green from a base of flame. Then for a month there was no rain. The “short fierce blaze of triumph” became a memory. Only tiny flowers bloomed, the size of a beeswing.

Towards the end of the year Frank was still revelling in his escape from the city. One of the blessings of living at Oesterval, he told me, was that he could get up at night when he was

unable to sleep, light the lamp without disturbing anyone and make a cup of tea; then in the bewitched stillness he could go out in his pyjamas and walk barefoot along the darkened beach. One night he threw out an onion with a black heart, to be buried in the morning. His door was open and sometime later he saw a large hare right in the shaft of light. The hare was so large that at first Frank thought it was a small buck. Frank kept still and watched. The hare was busy with the onion, crouching over it, holding it steady with his forepaws. Enormous ears swivelled back and forth. Tiny jaws worked swiftly and long whiskers flickered. When the hare came to the rotten heart of the onion he ejected it sideways, lips crinkled with distaste. The hare was enormously intent yet completely unaware of the man ten



Frank Wightman on board the hulk of the S.S. Karatara at Donkerгат Whaling Station. (See appendix:
Donkerгат.)

feet away from him. His little tail moved feverishly. Frank retreated softly and left the hare to his supper.

“I have so broken with the city interlude that it might never have happened,” Frank declared. “I can view with composure the idea of never seeing a town again. Yet I do find myself thinking of people I have known, wishing I could talk to them and listen to them. But the town becomes increasingly awful to me. People sometimes say to me: ‘Yes, the lagoon is lovely - but don’t you find that you are talking to yourself?’ They fear the absence of the bustle and the stink of the city. I am incomprehensible to them because I fear the market place.”

Of course there were holidays when Oesterval was crowded. At the Christmas peak there were forty

people and they used two thousand gallons of water every twenty-four hours. Frank knew, for he looked after the engine that pumped the water from the wells into the tanks. He met all sorts of people during week-ends and holidays, including a few of his own brethren of the sea. One was the captain of a South African naval academy; another the last British admiral on the Cape station, with a command embracing the whole circumference of the terrestrial globe from the equator to the Antarctic; a third the son of a Swedish master mariner in sail. The son had become a professor of history. Frank sailed with him in a fifteen-foot boat.

Early in 1967 Frank revisited Kraal Bay for the first time since his departure. Nearly two years had passed since his farewell to *Wylo*; and

as he looked round the bay he missed the familiar outline of the yawl. "I had to shut off certain emotional responses," Frank told me soon afterwards. " 'Stop it you fool - don't get sentimental,' I said to myself. Kraal Bay was in many ways better than Oesterval. I abandoned Wylo in folly or in wisdom and if I made a mistake I must accept it. Now I have that beautiful room, that lovely old place drenched in period, the stillness, the veld. It is different, but I can still bathe naked. Compare my present life with what I had in the city and you will see that the dark gods have been good to me."

Frank believed that for contentment one must abandon the personality that belongs to an episode of the past and step into one's present self. "They are different beings," he declared. "If you

do not you are precipitated into confusion. To each age its accoutrements. I do not steep myself in misery by thinking of my false teeth. Learn to pass on calmly. If you do not, life will turn you into one of those neurotics who are forever trying to convince their fellows that they are still 'in the running'. Usually to an audience of youth listening dutifully with disdainful eyes. Most people refuse to accept the fact that life will not stand still to be looked at; least of all will life be held in place just because, in a pattern of a moment, it happened to suit a mood of a moment. Life would be fatally calculable if you could do that."

As the winter of 1967 approached I spent a day with Frank when Oesterval was at the centre of a slow-moving depression, a panoply of cloud with

the outlines of far thunderheads under the edge. The rains were approaching. The scene reminded me of old photographs taken with a soft-focus lens. It was calm on the estate; one of those rare days when there was not a murmur of the far-off sea and even the chattering birds were quiet. The setting sun was an orange explosion, violent yet silent beneath a brooding sky of grey. A hare loped warily across the lawn to drink at the bird-bath; possibly the very hare that had eaten Frank's onion.

"At this hour the cars are grinding past my cell in the city, bumper to bumper, horns yelling, brakes screeching, gears grinding, tyres whistling," Frank recalled with a queer smile. "The city workers are on their way from the turmoil of the town to the peace of homes where radios blare in every

room, including the W.C. In the dank narrow passageways of that city dwelling there will be a reek of greasy stews being made by old women who have spent the day brooding in their rooms over their wrongs. Lethargic with self-pity and poisoned with the toxins of over-eating they will meet each other outside their doors, grunting, moaning and wheezing. One of them said to me: 'Doan ch-evver feel loundly in theh?' Nonplussed, I shifted my books to my other arm. As I tried to brush past her she padded beside me in her slippered feet. 'Ah wish ah wuz lahk yew!' The dark gods sent me to that cell for their darker purpose. Perhaps because I accepted it they did not send the furies to abide with me. I could not meet them in conflict, matching my power with theirs, so I smothered their potency in



Frank Wightman in the old seamen's graveyard at Salamander Bay. (See appendix: Salamander Bay.)

acquiescence. The power of the weak, if they only knew it, is greater than the power of the strong. By weak I mean flexible.”

John Thornton, the old friend of cable days, sent Frank a batch of faded snapshots in April 1967, pictures about half a century old. They were photographs of men they had both known at South American cable stations. “All dead except you and me,” Thornton wrote. Frank said the faces smirked or frowned self-consciously at him from the small squares; some of the men were obviously drunk. And suddenly he was plucked back into a world of urgent voices taunting and challenging him. They filled his life, as it was then, with the impact of personality and the ultimate lure of the human voice. As Frank looked at each face, each man

came back as though he had placed his hands on Frank’s shoulders. One had a Yorkshire accent but the bloom of youth had already left him, smirched by a disease then hard to cure; he had vanished mysteriously into the stews of Rio. Another had jet hair, an exact, metallic voice and a swift smile; but he lived for the brothels and ended his life in one when he was knifed. Another was blond with a trim body he over-clothed in those hot lands; he died four months after bringing a young wife to Buenos Aires. And there was Frank’s tennis partner and friend, muscled like a Hercules and vulnerable as a child; spontaneous and warm-hearted. They were transferred together from Rio to Pernambuco. The partner had strong legs and they spent their time off duty in the “fives” or on the tennis courts. When the partner

died years afterwards Frank said he “bludgeoned the shadows” to discover the cause. “Something to do with his leg,” was the only reply he received. Thornton said it was an achievement that he and Frank were left when so many had passed on. “Infamy!” Frank declared. “I count it no distinction to be the one who hung back.”

Something clicked in Frank’s mind and he was back in Rio, on his way to the instrument room. The Avenida Rio Branco was shining in the tropical afternoon downpour. At that time the Tin Lizzie was supreme in Brazil and there was a closed model like a little, square glass box, high and comical. All the well-to-do Brazilians had them and many were chauffeur-driven. They were all swishing over the streaming tiles of the Avenida at twenty miles an hour; if they had tried much more they

would have blown up. That sound of hurrying tyres had broken into Frank’s memory for good, though he did not realise it at the time. Then he had wondered whether that was to be the sound of the cities of the future; he who had known the London of horses’ hooves and crossing sweepers.

In the long nights on the lagoon he lived with his memories. “During the stillness and the darkness the mind goes flinging through the centuries - free at last,” Frank once told me. “What can any physical catastrophe signify? I wish that I could communicate the conquest of loneliness and the achievement of solitude. If people are ready for that sort of revelation it is already alive in them and it will come to the surface. If they are not you might as well recite Dido’s farewell to Aeneas in classical

Greek. To show men verities which are in conflict with the ideas which have supported them all their lives is to ask them to leap over a precipice.”

Again and again Frank re-lived the old nights in his kayak. This was enchantment. Low in the water she was, and the great seas approached unseen, so that he was lifted softly and hugely. The lean bow rose. He moved forward and seemed to be heading breathlessly for the constellations. A giddy pause and then the bow dropped. He moved back. All that enormous power came to him from stillness, in stillness and vanished into stillness. He never grew accustomed to the silent might of the sea at times when it was not thrown into flurries by the wandering winds. And the return to *Wylo*! The kayak surged down the great declivities and he would drop a

blade of the paddle to keep her straight. In the surrounding blackness the feeble wink of Hoedjies Point light was the only man-made thing. Then he felt the backwash from an island in the entrance. Careful now. As the kayak came round the corner the might of the sea vanished and Kraal Bay called him home. Those three small glow-worms far away were the lighted ports of *Wylo*.

The year 1967 saw Francis Chichester's great feat of circumnavigation by the Cape Horn route. To my surprise I found a note almost of jealousy in Frank Wightman's comments. Possibly his feelings had been aroused by the achievement of a man only a few years younger than himself; a magnificent lone cruise such as Frank could never hope to undertake in his last years. “This old blowhard will

become the Odysseus of the twentieth century,” Frank declared. “The cult of sail is coming back into currency but since people nowadays know more of the marvels of space than the sea the rubbish they have to read is unbelievable. Chichester’s voyage has been done several times before and in less seaworthy craft. He has not followed the course of the clippers. They sighted Kerguelen. He sailed his easting down hundreds of miles to the north. That bloody contraption he trails over his stern, the last and the worst of many self-steering devices, failed to work when the ship went over to her scuppers. And he spent ten hours in his bunk when that was going on. Just give me a ship like that! The design is poisonously conventional but she is nearly twenty feet longer than *Wylo*. I’ll do those passages gladly,

seventy years and all. I would ask my patron to stock the galley with nothing but five-pound tins of roasted cashew nuts and cheese and plenty of water. I’d knock thirty days off Chichester’s passage - or drown!”

In a later conversation Frank declared: “With Chichester we enter a new age. The age of the stunt, the gimmick. The man who roller-skates round the world. Exhibitionists. But even they are demonstrating human endurance. If Chichester brings off this imbecility I shall despair. Yet it may happen. Conor O’Brien in *Saoirse* rounded Cape Horn in a calm. Being a seaman, he was as incredulous as his readers. If Chichester survives there will be an armada of unseaworthy craft putting to sea.”

One winter evening Frank watched the owls. The sun was down, the light was

dim. A barn owl lived in the loft over Frank's room with a dozen bats and this owl was on the wing, hunting over the lawn. More owls joined in. Their flight was swift, erratic and soundless as their wings toyed with the air; and they travelled like projectiles. An owl came over the lawn at great speed, banked steeply as it approached Frank and streaked past him; one wing pointed at the grass, the other at the kill, both wings dead still. For a moment Frank glimpsed a fawn-coloured belly, feet tucked away in a pocket of feathers; the perfect streamlined shape. Yet even then Frank could not understand how the owl went through the air at such a speed without a sound. A second after the owl had passed Frank felt a small thrust of displaced air from the wings on his face. Constantly the owl

swooped, then checked as the quarry vanished. What could it be? The grass would not give shelter to a field mouse. A lizard perhaps? At last the owl hung between quivering wings; then the wings swept in against the body and the owl came down like a rocket. Three feet from the ground the legs came out from the feathers, the spreading, clutching claws appeared under the owl's chin. As the owl shot over its prey the legs moved again and the owl rose steeply. The hunter winged away to the tamarisk tree, legs dangling, something writhing in the claws. Frank walked to the spot where the owl had found its meal. Sure enough, there was the hole where a mole had come to the surface, a mole Frank had been trying to catch for days. Frank went to his room and stood for a moment at the door. The

bats were whickering. On the sands beyond the bush the flamingos were bugling softly. Frank sat down on his battered sofa and went over the experience. He had been fascinated by the speed and exuberance of the owl's convolutions in the air and wondered again why there had been no sound. He had shaken his head to make sure there was nothing the matter with his ears. The owl had looked like something disembodied, wild and deft and soundless.

Soon after that evening the rains came. The lamplight in the "great room" made the window panes impenetrable; but when Frank approached the glass he saw a million moths fighting for the light. On the roof sounded the heavy yet hesitant rhythm of thunder-drops, like the echoes of a learner typist at the end of a long passage. At the door

Frank saw that he was threatened by a moth invasion; he grabbed the handle and darted out. A smothering darkness enveloped him, filled with the fragrance of an exulting earth. Moths battered round him for warmth. There was no sky in the darkness but far away there was the mutter of surf and through the falling drops came the ozone of the ocean. The drops thumped on to Frank's hair and the lightning flashed as though a maniac was playing with a switch. The door burned yellow in the night as Frank hurried inside amid a whirling blunder of moths. The lamp, the beamed ceiling, the great room claimed him. "Is this the truth, the shelter?" Frank asked himself. He doubted it. Doors exclude everything that shatter the image man cherishes of himself.

Winter, but he walked south to Geelbek almost naked on the beaches. Icy winds assailed him at each headland. Fragrance of the veld caressed him in the bays. Wary flamingos stalked off on stilts. He looked back to the far vista of Constable Hill, like a stage backcloth against the clouds, and he saw a ghostly *Wylô* in Kraal Bay.

CHAPTER 19

THE LAST OF THE LAGOON

Solitude should teach us how to die.

BYRON

I HAVE been attacked by something foul,” Frank Wightman told me in July 1967 during a short visit to Cape Town. The medical specialist happened to be at Oesterval at the time and he dosed Frank with a drug which Frank described as “heavily potent”; yet he was able to detach himself from his illness and declare: “Odd to find a creature you have always brought to heel rounding on you with cries of fright and frustration. This morning I had to rest several times during a short walk.”

Frank had never been a regular or reckless smoker but now he gave up his few daily cigarettes. “I was

surprised to find how quickly the desire evaporated,” he informed me when I visited him in August. “I shall not start again. My sense of smell, a most desirable thing up here, is greatly enhanced. And as you see, the countryside is now starting to jolt your heart when you come round a corner on a vista. The dorsvloer, the old threshing-floor, a large circle surrounded by a thorn hedge, is breath-taking. If you walk round it on the high ground until the sun is behind you then you find yourself facing a thousand dazzling flowers. I am not easily bowled over by Mother Earth’s creations beside the lagoon; I have known her too long. But I admit that my heart missed a beat the other morning when I looked over the thorn fence. This was the harvest of the long months when I watered that expanse

with a hose that dribbled. Often I worked in blazing heat and stark naked when the earth was so tightly closed in defence that I had to prong it sharply beneath the meagre hose to make it drink.”

That day I walked beside the lagoon with Frank. I saw the shoulder of a hill sown with wheat from skyline to the edge of the road. It was young wheat, the single spikes thin and crowded. Through them shone the strong level rays of the sun. It was a startling difference between transmitted colour and reflected colour, a blaze of green incandescence that could never be rendered in paint. To heighten an effect almost beyond the power of the eye to register, an occasional full-blown poppy spread its petals of unthinkable crimson. Explosions of fire in a sheet of ice. And the sky was

filled with the quarrelling of birds on the wing and the closer sound of two cows with hooves crunching softly into the veld track. We stood listening to the oncoming hooves. When they were in step the beat was a regular unhurried lullaby; and when they broke step the beat was catching and compulsive. Suddenly the gates of Frank’s memory swung open and he said that he could hear the rhythm to which the miller danced in an early Diaghilev ballet called “Le Tricorn”.

Frank was feeling the cold at that time. It must have been his age and his ailment for he had seldom complained of cold before. “Am I growing old or is it really colder than anything I can remember on the lagoon?” he asked me. In the mornings he shrank from picking up glass, iron or china and that reminded him of England in winter.

His hand ached as it had done in his childhood. His room was an ice-chest in winter, yet he loved it. After a long evening reading or typing letters he filled his hot-water bottle. His breath misted as he turned down the bedclothes.

The old portable typewriter played a great part in the life of Frank Wightman; as I said before, he “talked” to distant friends as his expert fingers ran over the keyboard. Seldom annoyed by inanimate objects, Frank became testy when his typewriter refused to answer to his touch. “This typewriter is going to drive me to hurling it against the wall one day,” he said. “I am reluctant to spend a whole day taking the thing to pieces, with its million tiny parts, and reassembling it. I have just spent more than I can afford on an overhaul and it is still

giving trouble. I hate intensely doing tiny structural jobs with tools the size of needles. You have to wear a special eyeglass that magnifies a thousand times. It is clear that I would never have made a living as a watchmaker.” Soon afterwards he showed me a letter perfectly typed. “Just look at that,” said Frank. “In spite of my trumpeting’s about having to fiddle with tiny pieces the darned thing is working again. This is the result of nearly twelve hours on the floor of my room with a million tiny parts distributed on a newspaper. Just look at those dead-straight lines of type.”

Did Frank sense the coming end? “It is permissible to toy with dreams when there is not much time left,” he informed me. “I toy with them and go my way counting the gull calls. I seem to be sailing over the far green waters

to where Cabo Tormentoso is poised like a cameo against the southern sky. And I am content with beauty as the old heart ticks on. My withered body absorbs the beauty round me and when I sleep it patterns my darkness with bright dreams. And I have found this so late in life. Had I been just a little more intelligent when I was young I could have had it then. There were lavish chances.” Late in October the illness became more serious. Frank passed night after night struggling for breath and there were long spells when he could take in a little air only by kneeling uncomfortably beside his bed. The medical specialist visited the estate one week-end and urged Frank to enter Groote Schuur hospital for diagnosis and treatment. Frank not only had breathless attacks; he was coughing and losing weight. One day

he set out for the village on foot. One of the Oesterval partners drove along the road some time afterwards and found Frank lying in the sand. That settled the matter. Frank went to Groote Schuur just before the first heart transplant operation that turned the eyes of the world on this Cape Town hospital.

Ina Thomas found Frank robed in an enormous hospital nightgown and on her next visit she took him new pyjamas and a dressing-gown. Frank was remarkably happy in the ward; probably he was enjoying the unaccustomed attention, the food and treatment. Classes of medical students listened to the noises in his lungs and Frank smiled benevolently on them. “They do wonderful things to you in this hospital,” Frank told me. He was

suffering from emphysema,⁴¹ but a slow intravenous injection helped his breathing. After a week in hospital his condition improved and he was able to return to the unfailing hospitality of the Thomas family.

During his illness Frank had aged considerably. His face looked older, his hair was white, his manner mild. "The hospital was like a well ordered ballet," he declared. "Everyone knew just what to do. A man arrived raving in delirium but they soon quietened him. Some patients grumbled about the food but I thought the place was like an hotel." Only the antibiotic pills upset him; he suffered from side-effects, his sense of taste, balance and memory were affected and he felt sleepy. Late in November I drove

Frank back to the hospital for an examination. They gave him more pills and soon afterwards he returned to the lagoon.

"I am feeling years younger," Frank reported when I next saw him. "I can swim, work and walk to the village as usual. Your generous flow of papers and books keeps steadily on and I am truly grateful for the 1968 tide tables. I am revelling in tranquillity, silence and solitude. My new-found health has surprised the doctors." He spoke of an evening when he could not bring himself to leave the lawn at Oesterval although the day was dying. Swallows dipped and skimmed over the grass and the bats had come out of the loft for the opening of their day. The bats jerked through the air, forming a strange contrast with the swallows. There was never a collision. Such wild

⁴¹ See appendix: Emphysema.

and extravagant gyrations done at such speeds, and with such numbers of bats and birds involved, seemed almost nightmarish in the total silence. As though to render the scene utterly weird the barn owl swooped and glided on silent wings above the others, so large that it made them all look like a swarm of midges. The failing light was liquid colour and away to the west the sky was aflame and the air was crowded as in a dream. Frank felt that his chest was free and open again. As the swallows flashed off to their nests and the bats claimed the arena Frank turned away to the great room with a song in his throat. "However long I have to live, may it be in scenes like this," Frank said. "My trips to town will be rare in future."

Nevertheless he had to spend several weeks in town during January 1968, for his weight had dropped from one hundred pounds to ninety-four and he had been suffering from more breathless nights. They gave him injections and a fresh supply of pills and he travelled back to the lagoon thankfully on the railway coach. The fare was only two rands but the coach put him off at the remote railway station called Langebaanweg twelve miles from Langebaan village. He had to pay another three rands for a seat in the grocer's car to reach Oesterval.

He watered everything at Oesterval that had thirsted while he was away. He read the London papers I had given him. He spoke to me about his body. "The body is an animal and alone of all the animal kingdom it is the servant of man," Frank declared. "As a servant

it is unhappy when it is undirected, unhappy and confused. Unlike the modern household servant it is a true retainer in the old tradition. It finds fulfilment in carrying out orders. Yes, orders. It shrinks from the sight of the Master forgetting his part in the process. There are certain forms of living which have filled me with a shrinking distaste through a long life and the surgeons are now revealing new horrors. But I have never feared dying. That is simple and final.”

Early in February a truck driver found Frank lying beside the path between Oesterval and the village and carried him to the nearest hospital at Vredenburg. It was a painful attack of emphysema but they put him in an oxygen tent and he soon recovered. “Take it easy - you’ve had your warning,” said the matron when he left

for Oesterval. “It has been interesting in a way to watch the old hoss I have ridden for more than seventy years kicking and heaving because it is frightened to die,” Frank remarked. “This place is so healing, so gorgeous after what I have encountered that I leave it even for one night with something which approaches dread. When I woke, as I usually do, at two o’clock one morning I groped for the big torch, slipped out into a star-spangled night and shone it over the wide lawn. I lowered my aged knees to the dew and dwelt for a space with the whickering bats and the owls that played with the languid air. I would not have you imagine that I am dismayed by my illness. I’ve lost more weight and I now weigh eighty-nine pounds. Lovely to walk with but a bit of a cadaver to look at. Meanwhile

there is darkness and stillness and the smell of the earth and the cry of a night bird - and I know that I am still alive.”

Frank told me in March that he was looking forward more than ever to the coming winter. The first sign of a change in temperature came when he put a jersey over his shirt. For months he had worn a sleeveless shirt and he still worked naked on the threshing-floor. He longed to feel the nip of cold air on his skin. All day he raked the dry, dead stuff into the middle of the floor; then he struck a match and danced round it with a wet sack in case it jumped the boundary and set the veld on fire. He raked the precious ash over the parched earth to render this magic circle fertile. As he worked he thought of the slaves who had threshed and winnowed inside the

same old circle of tumbled thorn bushes. At that period the veld was so dry that the buck and game birds were devouring growths they did not usually touch. Anything newly-planted on the estate had to be protected with wire cages. The rains were not late. Farmers in that area dislike rain before April but there are usually heavy dews at night during January, February and March and this moisture prevents serious desiccation. So the veld was rich with the dying fragrance of bushes that had endured for years. Only the dazzling lichens were triumphant.

Unable to sleep, Frank walked softly out of his room one midnight and switched on his torch. A steenbok was nipping off petunia heads. Someone had told Frank that the flowers were a dangerous irritant but the buck seemed

to be unaware of it. The slender creature faced the torchlight in rigid silence and the eyes were pools of fiery phosphorescence. Frank switched off the torch and the buck bounded away into the night. Early in May the buck and guinea-fowl were rooting away at new fronds of tiny green in the earth. They were so ravenous that they hardly moved away when the familiar shape of Frank Wightman approached them. Frank tried to screen the threshing-floor with sheets of small-mesh wire laid on the surface but the pheasants and guineafowl flew over the thorn-fence, walked on the wire, pressed it down and pecked at the greenery through the meshes.

I spent another grand day with Frank at Oesterval late in May, a day when the lagoon had the finest winter climate in the world. Frank worked on

the threshing-floor, a bronze gnome looking smaller than ever through loss of weight yet active and well. He was still going for his early morning swim; the doctors had been doubtful about it but they had advised him that he would be all right as long as he did not shiver. "I never shiver," declared Frank. "It is cold in my great room at night without a fire but I fill a hot-water bottle and rest my feet on it as I lie reading on the tumbledown sofa. I am warm then, and content while my tired body allows me to read. But how wonderful it would be to experience life without a carcass."

Frank said he had rowed across to Kraal Bay several times to walk on Sixteen Mile Beach, a return to familiar scenes. He pointed to a vague shape on the Kraal Bay sands and told me it was the rusting skeleton of a

caravan. Someone had fitted up a 'bus-body with bunks and furniture and rolled it down the slope to a site on Frank's old beach. There the man and his family had been spending their weekends until vandals had raided the unprotected property. Windows were broken, all the furniture had been torn out, the caravan wrecked; so the owner abandoned it. I remembered that clean and lovely beach during Frank's years there and I sighed.

Outside the room Frank occupied at Oesterval lay an old wooden dinghy. Frank had built it just after the war with timber that cost twenty shillings. He had knocked it together in two days and used it until he sailed out of Saldanha Bay in 1947 bound for the West Indies. He did not want to carry the dinghy across the ocean with him as it was too small for a lifeboat and it

would have cluttered up the deck. As he was sailing close inshore near the Saldanha entrance Frank saw a farmer he knew. The farmer waved farewell. Frank put the dinghy over the side, knowing that the current at that spot would carry it inshore. The farmer had used the dinghy for nearly twenty years and had given it back to Frank "for sentimental reasons". Frank, the man who was always giving away relics of his past, accepted the gift.

Late that afternoon I drove Frank to Cape Town for a periodical medical test at Groote Schuur hospital. The chest specialist had given him a generous supply of penicillin tablets to ward off bronchitis. Frank had no fears. When he came to dinner with me afterwards he said the doctors had been surprised at his condition. Unfortunately this healthy phase did

not last. Frank was brought to town by Brian Lello early in June suffering from a severe attack of emphysema. I visited Frank in Groote Schuur hospital and found him breathing with difficulty and making frequent use of the inhaler. When I arrived next day he was receiving an intravenous injection. He could hardly stagger to the bathroom and told me he had never felt so weak in his life. I tried to arrange for him to spend some weeks at a convalescent home when he left the hospital but he refused. "I must go back to the lagoon," he decided. "It's so lovely up there and I cannot live like this with people all round me. I am a solitary." He seemed to think there was some healing element in the lagoon that would cure him. His friends wondered whether he would leave the hospital alive. However, the

powerful drugs restored him and after a week in hospital Frank was sitting up reading and chatting in the old lively way. He spent a few days with Brian Lello and then returned to Oesterval. A year had passed since his first attack of emphysema and he was able to say to me with deep sincerity: "I would rather die beside the lagoon than live in the city."

Nevertheless his life had become a struggle for breath. His letters to friends became short and infrequent and he explained it in this way: "I have been so occupied in my effort to extract enough oxygen from an unlimited supply that there has been neither time nor energy for anything else. Something should happen soon for no better reason than that the body seems to be losing interest.

Fortunately I have no fear of death. Bless you until I can write in peace.”

Some weeks later he visited Cape Town and returned to Oesterval on a dark night. It was so black on the lawn that he could only guess his position on the grass when he found the familiar slope with smooth ground underfoot. Frank listened to the small, busy communings of creatures of the night. As he stepped on to the lawn the voices were stilled. At last Frank reached the bird-bath, rested on it and allowed his parcels to fall. He was home. He became a pair of contented ears. The silence was soon broken by a wary whisper, full of soft interrogation. It was answered and presently a tiny chatter broke the enchanted darkness. Something alive stirred a wet bush and received a sprinkle of rain drops; then he heard

the shaking of a pelt. The buck are silent folk save for a snort that is seldom heard, a snort full of question and challenge. Frank waited and the snort came as the buck stiffened and picked up the human scent. Frank could imagine the ears pricked forward, the legs stiff. Then the great hush was broken as the buck leapt away over the tops of the bushes. A bat whickered past his face. Frank was home indeed. He gathered up his parcels and made for bed. “Some nights become a breathless race with that loping pacemaker whose face is white as leprosy,” Frank told me later. “I long for the dawn.”

Spring came again to the lagoon. After a generous winter (over twelve inches of rain) the flowers masked the naked land. In the midst of this transformation Frank was taken seriously ill

and thought he was dying. He crawled to the farm gate early in the morning, knowing that a school bus would pass that way. The bus carried him to Langebaan village and the storekeeper took him by car to the Vredenburg hospital. Frank had a high temperature and severe congestion of the lungs, but oxygen and intravenous injections gave him relief. He spoke to me of the "blessed security of the hospital" after his lonely ordeals at Oesterval; yet after nine days in hospital he returned to the lagoon. The doctor advised him to give up his long walks to the village and rest as much as possible. "This is impossible, so it goes on," Frank said. "I must have my fresh milk and my letters and papers. There is a difference between reasonable precautions and pampering. I accept life the way I want it - or at least the

way I am prepared to endure it. I have now been examined by hordes of doctors and they say I am paying the price of taking too many cortisones. I don't care. Those pills gave me the sort of health I used to enjoy before I heard the word emphysema. It lasted until I picked up a dose of bronchitis somewhere."

Llewellyn and Ina Thomas visited Frank at Oesterval in November and were shocked at his appearance and loss of weight. Frank was back in Groote Schuur hospital in January 1969. He informed me that a new doctor had given him a new and strenuous treatment; forced, mechanical breathing of air and oxygen which necessitated an X-ray examination afterwards. He said the oxygen made him drunk, a marvellous sensation. When he left the hospital he was



So he went back once more to Oesterval, to the great lawn, to the old buildings, the homestead and the outhouses bending their heads together over their memories.

breathing normally, without having to use an inhaler. I asked him whether he had thought of living closer to medical help and he replied: "Indeed no - yet further. Physical distress is so ugly that it ought to be kept away from one's fellows. 'Tell us your joys - we have sorrows of our own'."

So he went back once more to Oesterval, to the great lawn spreading silver-blue under the moon. Back to the old buildings, the homestead and the outhouses bending their heads together over their memories beneath the stars. The night was alive with the whisker of wings. In the far distance, across the swirling waters of the lagoon, the sea beaches lay dreaming. Over the beaches there would be a snowstorm of seabirds filling the sky with chimes. Frank told me he would hold on to that vision until the runner

with the bony face reached out to touch him on the shoulder.

Commander Bill King, the round-the-world yachtsman who gave up the race when his Galway Blazer was dismasted off the Cape coast, was brought to Oesterval by Brian Lello in February. Frank was in a sardonic but humorous mood and the three sailors sat up late over their wine. King told them that after a tough passage in a small yacht some years ago he had been invited to dinner by Winston Churchill. King described the hardships but his host was not impressed. "Yachting is uncomfortable, hazardous and unremunerative," said Churchill firmly and changed the subject. Frank Wightman greatly admired King the submarine captain with three decorations, the lone yachtsman who had fought his way

back to safety after his yacht had capsized. But Frank disliked intensely the design of Galway Blazer and other modern cruising yachts with gadgets he had never handled. "Imagine sailing in a junk-rigged, whale-backed boat," remarked Frank with contempt. "I want to walk about my decks, not sail in a steel tunnel with a cockpit the size of a manhole." Frank remained faithful to the age of *Spray* and *Islander* and *Wylo*.

March brought a spell of blazing weather. "I have swum a lot, right in front of my door," Frank reported. "But that is an exaggeration. I can no longer swim as that requires a pair of lungs. I stand in the lagoon and splash myself with water." Visits to Langebaan village had been limited by the doctor to one a week. Frank had to repair the windmill at this period and

from that height he was able to see any vehicle on the track and intercept it. In this way he sent his letters to the post. He did not look forward to the nights for he said it was dangerous to lie on his back. Sitting up was better and at times he could rest on his side and breathe fairly well.

Graham Young, the shipmate Frank had not seen for fifteen years, walked into Frank's room at Oesterval unexpectedly at the end of March. "The sight of him nearly stopped my aged heart," Frank declared. "Fifty, but still with the figure of the boy who sailed with me." The shipmate had been working in New York; now he was conducting a party of American scientists round South Africa. Young spent an evening with me soon after his lagoon visit. He said that he had found Frank frail but remarkably full

of life and wit. They had walked a fair distance over the veld together but Frank tired easily. It was a dramatic reunion. I asked Graham Young to sum up the Atlantic crossing in *Wylō*. "Courage is all very well when you have to face some dreadful yet brief experience," he replied. "But when you are in midocean, pumping for your life day after day - that is where ordinary bravery may fail. It went on and on. It is still a nightmare to me." Graham Young also revealed two secrets of Frank's life I had not known before. He said Frank's first letters from the lagoon after his return from New York made sad reading; they were filled with intense loneliness. Frank was learning to live with himself but the process was hard and slow without his shipmate. I also learned that when Frank sold *Wylō* and

left the lagoon he was suffering from painful arthritis of the right hand. It hurt so much that often he found it almost impossible to row the dory and that influenced his decision.

Soon after Graham Young's departure Frank's breathing became difficult. The medical specialist was visiting Oesterval and he offered to drive Frank to hospital. The unpredictable Frank refused on the ground that tiny flowers were emerging on the dorsvloer and if he stopped watering them they would die. So when Frank did reach Groote Schuur hospital he was only just able to breathe. They gave him injections and a new pill that enabled them to reduce the dangerous cortisone dosage. This treatment was so successful that when I spent a day at Oesterval late in June I found Frank more active than he had been for

months. In spite of “doctor’s orders” he had resumed his daily walks to Langebaan for milk and mail. Sometimes a friend in the village drove him back to Oesterval but more often than not he covered the five miles on foot. It was cold at night that winter and Frank told me he had found a layer of ice over the bird-bath on the lawn. Yet he survived in the “great room” and never felt tempted to light a fire in one of the houses and spend his evenings in the warmth. He said he was comfortable in his own bed with a hot-water bottle.

“I am determined to die in the open if I feel the end is near,” Frank informed me. “I shall stagger out on to the beach and the school children will find me when they pass in the morning. They will run to the police and there will be no unpleasant shock for the tenants

when they arrive at the week-end.” This unhappy ending almost occurred late in June when the medical specialist reached Oesterval on a Friday afternoon and found Frank in a state of collapse. The specialist drove to Vredenburg hospital, fetched oxygen and drugs and saved Frank’s life. A few days later Frank was back in Groote Schuur hospital. Llewellyn and Ina Thomas visited him there and were greeted with the words: “So glad to see you good people before I go to heaven.”

Frank was resilient, cheerful and obviously rallying when I spent an hour at his bedside. The previous night this brave stoic had watched with interest and compassion a man dying of emphysema. He described the technique used by the doctors and nurses in a final attempt to revive the



Frank Wightman in the dory he built at Oude Raapkraal and used on the lagoon. (Photo: Brian Lello.)

patient. The first moon visitors were returning to earth that day and I asked Frank what he thought of the achievement. His views were identical with my own. "I was horrified when they set out and prayed for their safe return," Frank declared. "The same amount of money. the Americans are spending on prestige would clear the hospital wards of the world if it was devoted to medical research."

A young doctor interested in the sea was in charge of Frank Wightman's treatment. They often chatted and the doctor asked Frank many questions. "Don't you ever think of the danger when you are alone in mid-ocean in a tiny boat?" Frank replied that there was no room for fear when one encountered the moods of the vastly impersonal sea. "When you are taking steps to meet danger you are too busy

to think about it," Frank explained. "However, it is better to be alone at such times. It is when you have someone with you who may do the wrong thing that you become worried."

Once again Frank praised the hospital, the nourishing soups and wonderful cheese on brown bread. "But I shall go back to the lagoon as soon as I can," he declared. "I know the danger signs now - the school children will find me on the beach." I left the "New Statesman" and Graham Greene's "Collected Essays" on his bed. "Bless you," said Frank in farewell.

Frank returned to Oesterval at the end of July and wrote to me soon afterwards: "At present I often don't know if I shall see the sunrise. My last visitors arrived when I was half-conscious, with an oxygen mask over

my face. They went away expecting to hear of my death at any moment.” August found him in Groote Schuur hospital again; and from there he went to Brian Lello’s home, the farmhouse called Oude Raapkraal at Lakeside, about fifteen miles from Cape Town. Brian and his wife (Fiona Chisholm, the “Cape Times” columnist) and Brian’s daughter Bridget cared for him there in a comfortable little cottage in the grounds. For days Frank sat beside the pond, watching the ducks and hens, the bees round Brian’s hives, the cats and dogs of the homestead. It was restful there. Frank read book after book from Brian’s vast library. At night when he could not sleep he switched on the electric kettle and made tea and read Bernard Shaw’s introductions to his plays. Frank told me that he now realised that

something had been affecting his health long before he sold *Wyllo*. He found that he could not swim out to the yacht from the beach without resting and often he had felt breathless while rowing. It was the slow and insidious approach of emphysema.

There was a step leading down to Frank’s bedroom in the cottage. One evening late in September the man who had once been a surefooted sailor fell heavily and the shock caused a prolapse of the bowel. The Lellos drove him to hospital and a doctor said he would try to work the bowel back into place. Frank asked if he could see the bowel. He was given a mirror and he informed me that it was the size of an ostrich egg. Later the treatment was completed by a suture. But Frank was already an invalid and the accident must have affected his condition. At

the end of September came the earthquake that caused eleven deaths and enormous damage to property in the Cape countryside. Frank, who had experienced earthquake shocks in South America, failed to identify the deep rumble; he complained to the Lellos that someone had been playing the fool with a heavy motor-lorry outside the cottage. I spent a morning with him a few days later. He became so weak that I had to put him to bed; a pitiful, shrunken figure, so different from the vital little man I had known for so long. There were moments when I thought he was dying. For the first time I found that the brilliant intellect had become confused. His speech was often slurred. This seemed to me the most tragic change of all. Nevertheless he yearned to see the lagoon again and appealed to me to

drive him up to Langebaan. An instalment of his pension was due and he could draw it only at the Langebaan post office. "We'll see the spring flowers," he urged. "On the veld just now it is like the earth at the time of the Creation."

I agreed and now I am glad, for that was the last time Frank Wightman saw his lagoon. October 14, 1969. Poppies were growing in the wheat fields along the Langebaan road, the tarred road that I had first known as a wagon-track; but the buck and the game-birds of the old days had retreated. The postmaster handed over a government cheque. Frank settled his bill at Marra's store for the last time.⁴² Then we drove on over the bumpy road to Oesterval and Frank unlocked the gate

⁴² See appendix: Marra, Jo.



Frank Wightman at Oesterval in October 1969, with the lagoon just behind him and Constable Hill in the distance.

for the last time. I had brought good coffee in a flask, Blue Mountain coffee. Frank asked for a second cup and ate the cheese and ham sandwiches with unusual appetite. It was so restful on Brian Lello's stoep that the magic of the old place sank into me once more. I listened with full sympathy while Frank spoke of his longing to return. The lagoon was a tremendous blue that day and I knew that Frank was seeing *Wyllo* in the distance against the white cliffs of Kraal Bay.

"That was my paradise on earth," Frank said. "I betrayed my vow. I left. How can we allow ourselves to be betrayed when we have found paradise? Why can't we live at that height of happiness always? If you encounter beauty, why must you seek contrasts with the beauty? I swore that

I would never enter the city again, but I went. Something failed. What was it? Certainly not the lagoon. It was something inside me that failed. Yes, I failed to live in that moment of high exaltation that flooded over me when I first discovered the lagoon. Man always fails. And now it is over."

Frank had to have more rectal stitches soon after that last visit. The surgery was only a partial success and Frank was living with another burden. I went with Llewellyn Thomas to see him in a convalescent home. Frank signed the forms we had brought him; an application for his pension to be paid in Cape Town and a power of attorney. Sadly he admitted that he was too ill to return to the lagoon. He was meek and tired now, an old man concerned mainly with drawing air into his lungs. I left the "New

Statesman” on his locker but I think it remained unopened. Then his breathing became difficult again. They had to rush him back to Groote Schuur; and that night the emphysema was so acute that the name of Frank Wightman appeared on the danger list. He fought for his life, the devoted medical staff with him, and the strong heart overcame the spectre of suffocation. Early in December he had recovered sufficiently to be transferred to a hospital for the chronic sick at Pinelands. Now the magnificent brain was failing. Letters remained unread. It was no use bringing the “New Statesman”. Frank thanked his friends for bananas and grapes and chocolate but I think he gave these gifts away to the attendants. Sometimes there was a flash of the old Frank; and when I showed him the cover of a “Sea

Breezes” magazine with the *Taranaki* under full sail he remarked with a smile: “If there is such a thing as reincarnation, I was on board.” Frank’s sister Catherine came from Rhodesia to see him; the fond sister who had sailed with him in *Typee* during clock tower days. Early on the morning of February 23, 1970 the brave heart beat slowly to a stop. While he was dying the largest sailing ship in the world, the Argentine *Libertad*, was closing in with the South African coast. Fiona Chisholm wrote: “Perhaps secretly I was wishing this would coincide with the moment that Frank Wightman’s lonely soul was cruising around looking for a square-rig berth somewhere.” While he was dying the lagoon lay calm under the sun. Then a north wind came through without warning, a cloud

passed over the sun and the people came out of their cottages to watch the transformation. It was eerie, they said. As they stood there gazing over the lagoon the waters were torn up by squalls. At Bossieskraal the telephone rang in the cottage of Mrs Carrie Smuts and she hurried inside to answer. She heard Ina Thomas saying: "Carrie, I have bad news for you - Frank Wightman has just died." Carrie spread the message and the village went into mourning. The sun came out and the wind died away. "Frank Wightman was here - he was saying good-bye to us," declared the lagooners.

So I saw the little coffin under the curtains in the Maitland crematorium. The service filled me with unbearable sadness, for I had stood there only a week before and said farewell to my

best friend on earth; the woman who had befriended many people, Frank among them. They carried Frank's ashes back to the Oesterval graveyard. Frank Armstrong Wightman had returned to the lagoon for the last time.

CHAPTER 20

CONSTABLE HILL

*Many hermits die as names only, with a
date and
a place as labels; we know nothing of
the
sorrows, the fears, the
disappointments, the
misapprehensions that beset them and
forced them
to turn away from the world.*

RALEIGH TREVELYAN

I AM climbing Constable Hill again, probably for the last time in my life, and I have a strong feeling that Frank Wightman is beside me. Beside me for a moment, then leaping ahead, unaware of effort now as he was in life. He will be on the summit before me, his face alight with exultation, while I take the ascent slowly and pretend to be searching for the American trees Frank Wightman

planted there long ago. No, the goats must have had them, those peach trees he brought back from Georgia on board Wylo.

Why did I return to this hill of memories? Probably in the same way that one returns to a room to recapture a thought that has been forgotten. I knew that Frank would be here; and a ghostly Wylo, too, riding at her moorings in Kraal Bay down below, dipping and plunging to the tides. I came here to see Frank again; to go over in my mind for the thousandth time the motives that turned him away from the world; not sorrows or fears, disappointments or misapprehensions, for there was no room in the mind of Frank Wightman for any such feelings. Here the lone sailor grew old on his ageing boat in a panoply of nights and days, the sunsets and the

mindless calls of the seabirds taking the place of the rancour's of human intercourse. Once, during the war, he spent seven months on board *Wylo* without leaving the lagoon. He had one visitor. He lived alone in that beautiful, desolate place with the atmosphere creeping into him; stealthy and insidious, gentle and unrelenting.

Of course there were times when he was glad to leave the lagoon for a few days. I would drive to Kraal Bay, covering the seventy-seven miles from Cape Town in just over two hours. The best days were in May, with winter due at any moment; days when I could swim and feel the sun on my body and walk over the veld revelling in the contrast with the city. Before we left Frank would row back to *Wylo* and rig his bird scares and nets. He would leave his dinghy moored near the

beach with his shoemaker's last as anchor. I asked him about this tool and he told me that he had bought a textbook and learnt to mend his own shoes to save money. When he first came to the lagoon he was spending three pounds a month on food and he did not wish to draw on his savings for anything he could do himself. His basic cost of living was double a quarter of a century later and he thought that was very reasonable in view of the depreciation of money. Well, there he would stand on the beach with his tiny suitcase, ready for the town. As I drove south he looked out of the window with the enjoyment of a child, savouring the scents and colours of the countryside, finding pleasure in the movement after a long spell on board *Wylo* tethered in Kraal Bay.

Yet the city would soon drive him back to the lagoon. I asked him whether he suffered from claustrophobia in cities. He felt a sense of confinement, he said, but never acutely. When he was in New York he refused to travel in elevators. He called them “iron cells” and said that people had been suffocated when they stuck. “Stone dead, smothered while standing up jam-packed,” Frank declared. He ran up the stairs of skyscrapers. Frank confessed that he felt a strong irritation in the midst of noisy crowds, a continual prickling of the spine and neck like a dog bristling; but this was discomfort, not fear. “The only thing to fear in life is fear,” he often said. A phobia was a response to something and a response was a personal thing which should be under control.

So he would plunge into city life without enthusiasm, roam the bookshops and buy on an impulse a book he could not afford. He would lay in a stock of paint and canvas for repairs; eat a little ice-cream and go at long intervals to a film. “Lawrence of Arabia” he remembered because of the audience-participation at a multi-racial cinema. The instant response reminded him of Latin audiences. But the ventilation was poor and towards the end Frank was in distress. His sensitive nostrils identified garlic, ghee and coconut oil. However, the behaviour of the audience compensated for the atmosphere. No whistles or yells. Just a silent jolt right through the theatre, a sigh or a shudder.

It was impossible to know Frank Wightman without thinking of Lawrence of Arabia. The similarities

were startling. Frank Wightman was not pursued by relentless fame like Lawrence; even after "The Wind is Free" became a best-seller there were few intrusions on his privacy. But the personality of Frank Wightman gripped discerning friends as the achievements and philosophy of T. E. Lawrence aroused the interest and admiration of the world. Both men were undersized, with sensitive faces, penetrating blue eyes and low, pleasant voices. Both men had mastered life. They sought freedom and found it by throwing off all the common handicaps, the poison of ambition, even the normal human appetites. Both knew full well that by giving away possessions they threw off their chains. Frank often quoted Lawrence's words on man's greed: "The fools don't realise that their

possessions in time come to possess them." Both loathed noise. "Only in silence can the soul hear its own accents." Both withdrew from the world; Lawrence to the sanctuary of the ranks, Wightman to the lagoon. Both were abstemious yet both loved fine coffee. Both were almost vegetarians. Both were fond of canoes and revelled in swimming. Both disciplined their bodies to a degree comparatively few men achieve. Both were good company, brilliant conversationalists, though they depended little on others. Both possessed enormous courage. Both were capable of great feats of endurance in their own chosen spheres; Lawrence in the desert, Wightman at sea. As writers both men were perfectionists, though Lawrence published his work and Wightman burnt many of his efforts.

Both were products of schools that usually produced types; yet here were two individuals who had escaped the deadly moulds. It has been said that T. E. Lawrence will live longest through his letters. Certainly those who were privileged to receive the letters of Frank Wightman will never lose the deep and vivid impressions that made a page from his typewriter resemble a picture accompanied by music.

Lawrence and Wightman had the same attitude towards suffering. Some unexplained inner strength enabled them to go without sleep or food and bear any pain. Lawrence is said to have learnt certain Eastern secrets. Wightman once spoke to me cautiously of a meeting with a yogi when he studied the exercises and the philosophy. Both men drove motorcycles; both had accidents. Both were

deeply interested in archaeology. Lawrence lost himself in the crowd, Wightman in solitude. Yes, it is uncanny yet it was pure coincidence. Wightman never aped Lawrence. The character of Frank Armstrong Wightman was formed long before the world had heard of T. E. Lawrence or read his works.

Frank Wightman craved to be left alone yet he found pleasure in his brief visits to the city and the company of friends. Then he would yearn for the lagoon again, the hours with his memories on Constable Hill. The veld scene would fade out and he would be with his mother in the Scilly Isles, amid the heather and the daffodils. Even then, as a small boy, the ships' figureheads claimed him; relics of wrecks that had filled the island graveyards. When he left school and

lived in London he wandered round the docks with an old-fashioned plate camera and started a hobby that went on for years, taking pictures of ships. He said his photography was imitative, not creative. Barges under sail were among his favourite subjects; he also admired the Penzance luggers, narrow and beautiful. Sometimes he thought that he would like to visit London again. He would take a room in a typical lodging-house with a landlady from "Cakes and Ale" and wander among the Londoners. Covent Garden would lure him again and the Old Kent Road at night and Greenwich Park. He would see Berkhamsted again and the village of Tring which he had always loved. He would listen and look and savour and keep his mind away from the past so that he would not spoil it all. Then when he was well away from

the London scene he would lay past and present impressions side by side and learn something; even if it was only the folly of going back.

Often he remembered the first time he tried to sail a boat. It was at Funchal, and he had never had a lesson. A fisherman hired out his sailing boat with a spritsail. Frank pushed off happily from the beach accompanied by another cable operator. The trusting companion thought Frank was an expert. Frank was so ignorant that he made the jib sheets fast round the mast. The wind freshened and they were blown away from the island; they could see Camara de Lobos and the coast beyond Brazen Head. Frank gybed her round and she nearly filled. They baled and Frank used his wits and they got back to the beach. The fisherman cursed Frank and refused to

let him hire a boat again; but a sea education began that day at Funchal. When he was in South America he owned or hired boats in various places. His little *Senorita* at Rio was a sailing dinghy, clinker-built, sixteen feet overall and decked for'ard. At Valparaiso he had a tiny thing called *Lionel*, like a naval cutter. He sailed a catboat at Pernambuco and made his first cruise in her, one hundred miles down the coast and back again during a long week-end. He was alone. The sea had accepted him and he made no more foolish mistakes.

South American memories! It was all laden with romance for young Frank Wightman. His seniors had shepherded him round the Boca in Buenos Aires during the gun and knuckleduster days, with street after street of brothels and an army of

vigilantes at the wildest parts. Frank was more interested in the sailing ship hulks along the Boca waterfront; but he said the lovely Argentinian girls danced the tango like witches. Sometimes he thought of the narrow Rua do Bom Jesus in Rio, the shops filled with rush hats and basketwork and screaming parakeets. Scenes loomed out of the past lit with a glow that could never fade; the incomparable light shed by the heart on the scenes of youth. A light that never grew dim. A light from the days when romance still lay ahead; a light seen always over the shoulder. Rio was like that; the street of the gold workers, each tiny dark shop sparkling. Petropolis was full of Royalist families living on their estates in hidalgo exclusion. Pernambuco was a small town of bridges spanning evil

marshes. You could take a tram out to Olinda and step into an untouched world with the wrecks of sailing ships on the reef and palm-thatched huts of primitives who lived by throwing parachute nets for fish. He loved the country and the Latin peoples. He looked forward to a long week-end after many hours of overtime for then he could wander on the beaches. He was walking with an operator named Seymour near Pernambuco, a tall man who never seemed to have control over his limbs. Seymour plunged on and stepped into quicksand's. Within a few seconds he was almost up to his waist. Frank shouted to him to lie down. If you lie flat in quicksand's you float, even higher than you do in water. Frank showed him how to roll out on to firm ground.

Cable days! Messages came to the operators on forms bearing the words: "Your attention is called to the importance of writing clearly." Those forms were thrust on to the rack before Frank as he sat manipulating the instrument that turned the scratchy Portuguese writing into cable slip. The vast, brilliantly-lit instrument room whined and clicked and the dynamos hummed. It was an assured, unhurried, hypnotic hum that did not stop for a moment through the years. Men came and went but the instruments went on for ever. Sometimes the night staff were disturbed for a few moments by someone who had been at a party; a man who plied his tappers furiously while his instrument registered the errors. Supervisors looked up from their desks and the ears of all the other tappers twitched in sardonic acknow-

ledgement. Then the droning instruments swept in again to rule their kingdom.

Another curtain rises, the stars of the Russian ballet are on the stage, the most perfect dancers the world has ever known. Frank remembered Nijinsky and for the rest of his life he looked for the reincarnation of the man who almost defied gravity; the man who seemed to come down at rare intervals to touch the stage with his flying, eloquent feet. Frank saw Nureyev on the screen. No, this was not a reincarnation.

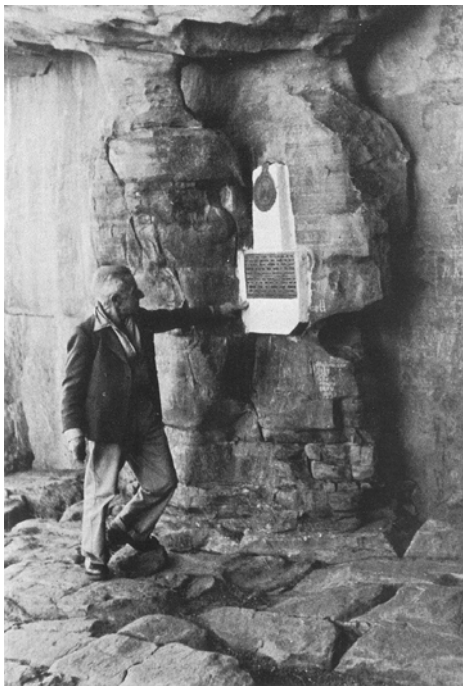
Frank closes his eyes again. He is coming on watch at dawn to find the *Birkdale* under full sail, thrusting smoothly before a breeze on the quarter, over a flat sea hung with meadows of mist. The mist swirls like smoke through the climbing splendour

of the spars and there is an iciness on deck. She is making eight or nine knots with all her sails held steady. In the steel-grey world of water there is no sound but the sleepy murmur of small seas thrust aside by the vast onset of the lean and lovely *Birkdale* under her towers of sail. Frank climbed out on the bowsprit that evening. The figurehead stared up at him like someone entranced. The setting sun burned through the sails, a furious yellow. Darkness came and the phosphorescence flamed beneath the sightless eyes of the woman with the secret smile. Frank was fascinated by the figurehead. He went out on the bowsprit again when the *Birkdale* was travelling hard down in the "roaring forties". He looked up at the towering pillars of canvas. He gazed down at the cutwater and the little figurehead

with her dreaming smile, plunging her face into the cold seas, then rising with the water streaming off and the face still smiling.

Everything was new and strange to Frank Wightman while he was serving in the *Birkdale*. He was so raw that he had to keep his wits about him to compete with men whose very life it was. But subconsciously he must have been taking everything in because it was there when he sat on Constable Hill and summoned up his memories. In retrospect he could hear the tones of the voices and see the expressions on the faces. Sometimes he was startled by the perfection of the recall. One of his shipmates in the half-deck smelt of paraffin and feet; another seemed to carry the odour of onions; another of wet clothes; another of hair, greasy hair. Their voices too, were sharply

individual. Arguments came back to Frank; imbecilities of discussion returned to Frank's pleasure and surprise. Frank disliked one lad but admired his voice in emergencies. In conversation the lad mouthed his words through wet lips and his voice had a fluffy quality. Yet when a "reef topsails" voice was needed on a wild night this lad could make himself heard aloft. His voice was full of metal and it rose above the sails flogging in their gear. Long afterwards Frank met one of his half-deck shipmates in Cape Town; the man was drunk and unshaven and wanted money. Frank left him in a bar, cashed a cheque for ten pounds and handed over the notes; then he looked keenly for a moment at the wreck of the young man who had been so valiant at sea. A tall fellow with the face of a spaniel and a fine



Frank Wightman in the Bushman cave known as Heerelgement, to the north of Saldanha.

Explorers and travellers since 1712 have carved their names in the cave.

torso. He was welcome to the money, given in allegiance to Frank's memories of nights aloft.

Landfalls! The tiny shape of *Wyllo* in Kraal Bay reminded Frank of those moments touched with magic. Frank declared that every isle had its own way of coming up out of the sea, a first mysterious revelation that always stood by itself. When he made St. Helena the sun caught a soaring buttress of rock and held it, steady among the clouds, while the island built up in massive deliberation from the sea. He approached Ascension in the darkness, and it was immense when the sun rose, a stark lunar outline. Brazil seemed like a cameo landfall for such a vast land; the blue tropic sea, pale green shallows, then a small headland of warm sandstone with palms. Miami was a silhouette of

skyscrapers against the glow of late afternoon, fragile as a desert mirage. New York was a contrast, for he arrived by motor-coach on a blazing July day wearing his seafaring whites and sandals. "Gee, you're swell," they told him when he appeared timidly for a television show. "Gee, you look cool."

Women? There were few women in Frank's life. That one revealing glimpse, the ballet dancer, was brief and vivid and almost unique. I felt that he would rather describe a ship's figurehead than a living woman's face. Once he spoke to me about a woman he often saw in one of the lagoon hamlets; probably in a shop. He made me wonder whether it was insight or sheer imagination. She was a large, heavy swarthy woman who looked at Frank with "night eyes", out of an

expressionless face. She never smiled. Frank said she was either remote or monumentally discreet; or perhaps supremely understanding. "I was compelled by that dark presence," he said. "She could be made the subject of a novel. What is she - male or female? A sort of village goddess, someone called up from the immemorial past. A creature who comprises all her contemporaries, and something that is beyond them. Something passionless, waiting, patient, infinitely enduring. With depths no one has plumbed, or ever shall. She has retreated to some inner citadel."

Frank was often scathing when he talked of women in general. "Never use logic in dealing with women," he declared. "You'll be frustrated, beaten down." He said the Spanish types in

South America were either wizened bags of bones or else they had blue-black hair and huge dark eyes. But those women were in the harem stage; their menfolk were still living in the reign of Philip II. One lagoon episode which Frank hardly ever mentioned was the presence on those shores of a charming and gifted woman he had met in New York. She bought a house and spent three years beside the lagoon, so it is more than probable that Frank had influenced her life in some way. "She could dress," Frank told me. "You were proud to be seen with her. She could make an old towel seem stylish. Her voice had a caressing note and when she turned her attention to you she made you feel that you were the only person she was interested in. Yes, she was a charmer." That was all and I am sure she did not

change Frank's life. The giant remained in hiding on board *Wylo*, miles away across the lagoon. When he rowed over for his mail he visited the charmer. One day she departed without ruffling the calm surface of Kraal Bay. Of that I am sure. Someone said of T. E. Lawrence: "He was justifiably self-sufficient and up to the time of his death no woman had convinced him of the necessity to secure his own succession." That was equally true of Frank Wightman.

I look round for Frank, and feel his presence. Frank Wightman, with his blue eyes in the bronzed face, lips cracked by the wind, fair hair heavy with salt. He had brought *Wylo* into this landlocked haven among the hills sloping easily to the lagoon. Those white specks far away were farms but where *Wylo* lay there was only nature,

the lagoon and the veld, the distant growl of the open sea coming over the sand dunes. Here he had discovered an odd pocket, a gentle eddy in the rage of the Cape summer. Here are strange nights of whispering stillness when the lagoon is obliterated by the shroud of fog; when a yacht's bow is invisible from the cockpit; when the cabin ports send out shafts long and rigid into the night.

Wightman and *Wylo* had known many anchorages. Each had its appeal, from the gaunt loveliness of Ascension to the brocaded artifice of Dominica. Few had offered security. Kraal Bay was secure and Frank had accepted it gratefully. His calendar became an unhurried flicker of nights and days unlabelled by dates. He no longer measured time by the hands of the clock but by the swing of the tides, the

march of the seasons, the earth adorning herself. Time as it was measured in the cities ceased to exist. Frank had found a new time. Time to live.

One last scene, so bright on the screen of the mind that every movement is clear. A motor-lorry stops on the white chalk road above Kraal Bay, the whaling station lorry that so often carried Frank to the city and back to the lagoon. From the cab emerges a small figure with a little suitcase. Dark native faces lean over the open part, a box and a parcel are handed down. The lorry thunders away into the night; and as she goes the headlamps pick up a steenbok crossing the road, an owl swooping down on a tiny animal, a mouse or a mole. As the lorry turns a corner her lights throw up the shadow of a man over the dunes;

and now the man is a giant indeed. Then the lorry disappears and there is only the noise of the crickets, the hooting of the owls, and the faint, mercifully faint barking of dogs on the far side of the lagoon. The man takes off his city clothes, brings in the dory and its strange anchor, places his belongings in the stern. Naked in the darkness he runs into the lagoon and washes off the poisons of the city. Each oar stirs up a great pool of phosphorescence as he rows out to the yacht. Now his music has a ringing note, the call of his favourite birds, those black and pure white migrants from the north, the avocets. The city is far away when the giant can listen to the avocets. He is home again and lighting the cabin lamp, a giant safe in his sanctuary, a giant in hiding.

APPENDIX
PERSONALIA, GAZETTEER AND
GLOSSARY

This section is included for the benefit of those readers, outside and inside South Africa, who are unfamiliar with the world of Frank Wightman, the history and geography of the Cape coast and Saldanha area and certain Afrikaans words used in the narrative.

AVOCETS

Dr. J. M. Winterbottom has pointed out that the tidal Langebaan lagoon is the most important wintering area in the South West Cape for migratory waders from Europe. Several rare species of birds have been identified there. The avocets are graceful, active waders, the only birds with recurved (upturned) bills. They have striking black and pure white wing-bars.

Charles John Anderson the explorer called them “handsome and peculiar, shy and wary”. Frank Wightman noted flocks hundreds strong on the lagoon. When the tide recedes the mud flats offer them worms, insects and tiny shellfish. Avocets feed with most unusual scooping movements of their bills. Frank Wightman also watched newly-hatched avocets coming out of their nests on the low islands at the southern end of the lagoon and making at once for the water. The lagooners used to trap avocets for the pot as the flesh resembles snipe.

BOERMEEL

Unsifted meal used widely in the South African countryside. This coarse wheaten flour is found not only in bread but in porridge. Frank Wightman made his “Harry Pidgeon” loaves from boermeel.

BOKKOMS

A smoked, salted herring is known in Holland as a bokking and the Cape bokkom is probably derived from that word. A bokkom is first pickled in strong brine and then dried in the sun. It must be grilled. There are also smoked bokkoms, made from old and often secret recipes.

DASSEN ISLAND

This star-shaped island of five hundred acres, thirty-six miles north of Table Bay, was named Isla Branca by the Portuguese discoverers because of the white covering of guano. Here and elsewhere along the Cape coast the explorers saw the first penguins. Vasco da Gama described them as “large as ganders and with a cry resembling the braying of asses, which could not fly”. Diaz and Da Gama

killed and salted penguins as food and many other early navigators called at Dassen for this purpose. Van Riebeeck sent men to Dassen to club the seals and collect seabirds and eggs. The French sailor De Flacourt wrote: “The penguins remain longest in the water and are the most eager. They do not fly and their wings are good only for swimming, but they swim in the sea as fast as other birds fly in the air. Their flesh has a fishy taste.” De Beaulieu, another Frenchman, declared: “Penguins are birds, which instead of wings have two fins and two broad paws, upon which they walk upright and with which they hollow the ground to make their nests. They have white bellies and black backs and their heads are very thick and their beaks like those of a raven. For my part, I take them to be feathered fish.”

Sir Edward Michelburne (1605) named the place Cony Island because of the hyrax colonies (incorrectly termed rock rabbits) he found there. These mammals, known as dassies in South Africa, must have been there when the sea marooned them by forming the island five miles from Ysterfontein Point. The dassies are still there, and tortoises and small snakes are also found among the penguins. Early navigators left English rabbits and sheep on the island. Dassen is a fine grained tourmaline granite outcrop but it supports milk bushes and other plants and green herbage flourishes in the winter.

Van Riebeeck fortified Dassen against the French. A small redoubt was built and cannon mounted. The island was also used as a punishment station in the early Dutch period. Teuntje

Bartholomeus, wife of a burgher, was banished there in 1663 “for libelling a certain honest woman”. She had to spend six weeks alone.

Dassen Island has seen a number of shipwrecks, the following among them:

- 1801 Cutter owned by Tielman and Roos of Cape Town.
- 1829 Ship *Lady Holland*.
- 1839 (March 13). Cutter *Shylock*.
- 1850 (February 13). Barque *Childe Harold*.
- 1865 (October 29). Barque *Queen of Ava*.
- 1876 (October 19). R. M. S. *Windsor Castle*.
- 1890 (May 24). S. S. *Ashley Brook*.
- 1891 (July 31) . S. S. *Wallarah*.
- 1916 (June 26). S. S. *Ping Suey* (Salved eight months later).

Mary Molesworth, daughter of a general in the Madras Army, wrote a lively account of the *Lady Holland* wreck. (See my book “So Few are Free”). The Rev. Charles Pettmann, author of “Afrikanerisms” and books on South African place names, was among the Windsor Castle passengers. (See my book “Almost Forgotten, Never Told”).

A Portuguese seaman named d’Almeida settled on Dassen about the middle of last century to collect the penguin eggs. He was succeeded by his son and grandson. Cherry Kearton, the famous wild life photographer, spent months on Dassen after World War I, filming the penguins. One day d’Almeida reported that he had seen a mermaid. Kearton the naturalist had no difficulty in identifying it as a dugong.

DONKERGAT

Whiffs of the heavy “roast beef” aroma from the blubber tanks of Donkerгат whaling station reached Frank Wightman in Kraal Bay during the season. The station was built in 1911 and within four years the company had sold oil worth £100,000.. Between the wars the factory closed down for years owing to the dramatic fall in the price of oil. During World War II there were prosperous times and after the war the Donkerгат whalers brought in two thousand whales in one season. The catch diminished in recent years and the station closed down not long ago.

DORSVLOER

The dorsvloer is a relic of the pre-mechanised era when farmers carried out every stage of bread production on

their farms. They made the hard, smooth, circular *dorsvloer* and spread the sheaves of wheat over it. Horses, three abreast, were led round the floor, followed by labourers who turned the straw and removed the dung. Thus the grains were separated from the ears after hours of treading. The winnowing process came next, in a south-east breeze. At last the chaff was swept away and the wheat was bagged.

ELANDSFONTEIN

On this farm, sixty miles from Cape Town, there is an area of two square miles of sandy desert. This is the site of the dramatic archaeological discoveries, ranging from stone artefacts to the skull with Neanderthaloid characteristics. Bones of fifty species of fauna (twenty-six extinct) have been uncovered. Specimens new

to science included a sub-species of baboon with short neck and long legs, a large lion and a giant buffalo. Remains of eighteenth century Dutch clay pipe-bowls were also found under the dunes.

EMPHYSEMA

This condition comes about when the sponge-like organs of the lungs give way. Larger spaces are formed, the surface area is reduced, and in an attack breathing becomes difficult. Various treatments are available though there is no permanent cure. The breathing process can be assisted and bronchitis relieved. Antibiotics are prescribed for the bronchitis and aerosols are often useful in dealing with the spasm of the bronchial tubes.

GERBAULT, ALAIN

Alain Gerbault, French wartime air pilot and later a tennis champion took to the sea at the age of thirty. He was the first man to sail alone across the North Atlantic; and later he sailed his narrow-gutted racing cutter Firecrest round the world single-handed. Frank Wightman and the author met Gerbault in 1928, when he lay for some time at the clock tower in Table Bay Docks.

HARDERS

Harders are the mullet of Cape waters. They are at their best when grilled and served with butter sauce; but millions of harders are lightly salted, dried in the wind and sold to farmers far inland. Some harders reach a length of two feet but most are much smaller. They are also known as springers

owing to their habit of jumping out of the water.

HOEDJIES BAY

Hoedjies Bay is an old name and like Saldanha it has never been properly explained. One would expect to find a “little hat” in the neighbourhood; and indeed there is a koppie which might conceivably have reminded someone of a hat. This two-hundred-foot koppie, however, is known as Baviaanskop, though the baboons departed long ago. I think that Hoedjies is a corruption of a much older name. First it was Potter’s Bay and nine years later it appeared on a chart as Ootjens Bay. A later English chart marked it as Oetiens Bay or Oedekens Bay. There is a legend about a cargo of hats that drifted ashore after a shipwreck; but Frank Wightman found it hard to believe that any

shipmaster (however drunk) could lose his ship in the calm waters of Hoedjies Bay. It remains a mystery, like Saldanha itself, like the mysterious Pepper Bay below Baviaanskop.

Settlers were repelled for a long time by the waterless shores of Hoedjies Bay. Dutch surveyors inspected the place during the seventeen seventies, after many ships had been lost in the Table Bay winter gales. They decided that although Hoedjies Bay offered a safe anchorage it had no other advantages as a place of refreshment. Farmers occupied land round the bay during the eighteenth century. Geelbek, Springbokfontein, Oesterval and Witteklip were four early farms. Horses and cattle flourished. Wheat was the first grain crop, while rye and oats came later. Sheep lost their wool on the bushes and so the meat species

were favoured. But always the water shortage was a handicap. Visitor after visitor deplored the absence of fresh water. George Thompson, merchant and traveller, echoed the sentiments of many earlier writers when he declared: "It is in fact one of the safest and most capacious havens in the world. Had Nature placed it where Table Bay is, or poured the Berg River into it in place of St. Helena Bay, it would have enhanced beyond calculation the value of the whole Colony."

Among the interesting accounts of Saldanha at various periods discovered by Frank Wightman during years of reading was one by a passenger who landed at Hoedjies Bay from the Union liner *Cambrian*. This ship put in there in 1871 owing to shortage of coal, using her woodwork as fuel. Fishermen were living in beehive huts

of willows roofed with skins. A storekeeper named Vanderbyl had started a business, and a passenger from the *Cambrian* reported: "Every possible necessity of human existence could be satisfied there. His stock included the salvage of fire and wreck. There I tasted the home-made brandy called 'Cape Smoke'." Saldanha farmers sent most of their produce by sea to Cape Town at that period. The passenger remarked: "Farmers rub along with very few shillings in their pockets but abundance of food and health. It is a patriarchal scene. Sheep and lambs drink from a long trough near the white homestead. One farmer was building a dam wall of earth faced with pebbles, helped by his Hottentots. He made sun-dried bricks with clay. The kitchen is a dome of wattle and mud behind the house. Mutton and

brown bread are served three times a day. This is a Rip van Winkle country." At another farmhouse in the district the passenger met a farmer who said that his Huguenot grandfather had spoken French.

When the Stephan brothers set up in business at Hoedjies Bay they built the wooden jetty still known as Stephan's Jetty. Each fishery had its own little wharf, built from the timbers of wrecked ships. A Cape directory published in the late eighties mentions an English Church at Hoedjies Bay, a school, a post office, six shops and a wagon-builder. Several of the Stephan steamers covered the sixty-four mile run to Table Bay in eight hours. Holmberg's store on the waterfront was turned into an hotel. Small steamers of the Bucknall Line, the Balgay and Balgowan, ran week-end

excursions to Hoedjies Bay early this century; price three pounds seven and six return, including a night on shore. You could stay at the hotel in those days for seven and six a day or forty-two shillings a week.

The first crawfish factory was built near Hoedjies Bay before the end of last century. James Kasner was among the pioneers. He owned the sixty-foot cutter *Britannia*, which he used for sealing and carrying crawfish; and the sunken rock he struck off the village of Hoedjies Bay still bears his name, Kasner's Blinder.

Old people in the Saldanha district told Frank Wightman of an unexpected event which brought hundreds of farmers to Hoedjies Bay in December 1904. A tiny Dutch freighter, the *Batavier VI*, anchored off the village and a Dutch admiral with

the unusual name of Macleod landed and went to the post office. He had important news for Cape Town. The ship was carrying the body of President Paul Kruger for burial in Pretoria and the admiral was notifying the Cape Town reception committee of the time of arrival. Farmers broke away from their harvesting and searched for flowers and wreaths. Cavalcades of Cape carts drove along the white, dusty road to the bay. The people of Hoedjies Bay and district were the first in South Africa to file past the massive teak coffin on its pedestal in the black chapelle ardente on board the S.S. *Batavier VI*.

It was in 1912 that a large gathering assembled at Hoedjies Bay to welcome the first railway train. There was a narrow-gauge line in those days,

and Frank Wightman travelled over it himself not so long afterwards.

LELLO, BRIAN

Brian Lello was born at Mooi River, Natal in 1915. He became a journalist. In 1938 he joined the five-ton cutter *Driac II* in Durban and crossed the Atlantic in her to the West Indies. (This was the famous little yacht owned by Mr. A. G. H. Macpherson, collector of marine paintings.) Lello remained in the West Indies for some time, working his passage from island to island in local schooners. He served in the Middle East and Italy during World War II as a war correspondent. He joined the "Cape Times" after the war and then became editor of "South African Yachting News". Lello is also a naval architect, painter in oils and water-colours and a fine photographer. He is interested in organising South

African entries in international ocean racing events and he assisted in the building of the large and successful racing yacht *Stormvogel*. Then he played a leading part in the *Voortrekker* project. Brian Lello was appointed technical adviser to the Springbok Transatlantic Race Committee and was among those who selected Bruce Dalling as skipper of *Voortrekker*.

LICHTENSTEIN, DR. MARTIN (See also: Oude Post)

The German explorer, Dr. Martin Lichtenstein came on the Saldanha scene early last century. Like Thunberg (q.v.) he was a guest at the government post, now Oude Post; and he found a fellow countryman named Stoffberg in charge of the place. There, too, was an old soldier, seventy-nine years of age, who had

served under Frederick the Great in the Seven Years' War. This veteran regaled Lichtenstein with stories of old battles and played marches and dances on the violin. Lichtenstein recorded that Stoffberg filled five hogsheads with fish in one afternoon. The slaves loved fish and many colonists had fisheries round the bay. Carts came to Saldanha and carried the fish away as far as the Bokkeveld. Stoffberg also had penguin eggs and gulls' eggs on his menu, and the vegetables from his garden were well-flavoured.

From the signal station at the highest point of the mountain over Stoffberg's post Lichtenstein admired the view. He said the maps were all inaccurate as the bay did not run very far inland. "Five islands planted by the hand of nature break the force of the west winds that blow into the bay,"

Lichtenstein wrote. "It is large enough for several fleets. Saldanha is like a fresh water lake, abounding in fish and becoming shallower and shallower. A rugged and lofty mountain in the middle of the western peninsula runs directly into the bay. Over it lies the road with deep precipices on the right hand, and on the left crags. The noises of our cavalcade frightened small buck." He observed the fields on the coast moistened by the "vapours of the sea," which thus provided abundant food for cattle. "The sight of this smooth expanse of water, surrounded by a circuit of high hills, was quite reviving to us," summed up Lichtenstein. On a sandbank in the lagoon he saw two hundred flamingos. It would have been possible to kill a dozen with one shot, but the people had never molested them as they had

not yet discovered that the flesh was delicious and the tongues were especially tasty. Lichtenstein captured two flamingos and kept them as pets, but they soon died owing to lack of their usual food.

LLOYD, GEORGE ALBERT

See "In the Land of Afternoon" by Lawrence G. Green (Timmins) for the full story of Lloyd. He was a deserter from an American sailing ship who settled on the lagoon before the year 1863 and founded the village of Church Haven. There he worked for many years as school teacher. Lloyd also served in the Royal Navy in Cape waters and helped to chart Saldanha Bay; a sandbank he discovered in the harbour entrance bears his name. Lloyd died in 1916. He often spoke to his family of a memorable event at Saldanha, the arrival in the spring of

1863 of the Confederate raider Alabama. Her tired crew beheld a countryside alive with arum lilies and golden bushes. They were piloted into Saldanha by the schooner *Queen*. Captain Semmes of the Alabama picked a wild pelargonium and recorded with satisfaction: "I felt like a weary traveller who had laid down, for a time, a heavy burden." The Alabama lay off Hoedjies Bay for a week while the ship's company painted the storm-beaten, rusty man-o'-war, caulked her seams and mended her sails. Lloyd said that farms were left to the servants and house-dogs; whole families trekked to the bay in wagons and Cape carts, and Semmes made them all welcome. One young man informed Semmes that he had never been on board a ship before. They brought presents of venison,

game-birds, ostrich eggs and ostrich feathers. Purser Galt of the Alabama bought beef and mutton for the ship. More and more wagons arrived and people camped on the beach. The decks of the Alabama were crowded with visitors and one of the officers recorded: "The men wore corduroy knee-breeches and hunting shorts, and carried rifles over their shoulders like pioneers." Semmes noted the "wild picturesque country where nature has played strange tricks with the solid granite rocks which lie scattered on the coast and over the hills."

Hunting and fishing parties were organised, Lloyd remembered, for the seamen who had lived on salt beef and pork for months were delighted with the steenbok, pheasant and harders. One hunting expedition ended sadly, however; the officers were returning to

the Alabama at the end of the day when an engineer named Gummings shot himself accidentally. His marble tombstone, on the farm Kliprug near the village, is the only Confederate monument in South Africa.

MAMBA

The mamba is the longest poisonous snake in South Africa. It is one of the front-fanged group, injecting a nerve-poison which soon proves fatal unless proper treatment is available. The mamba is usually less dangerous than the puffadder as it is non-aggressive unless molested and prefers escape to biting.

MARRA, J.

Frank Wightman was very fond of this old Sicilian storekeeper. Marra arrived in Table Bay in the barque Umberto Primo at the end of last century. He

was knifed in a waterfront fight and left behind in hospital. When he recovered he joined a fellow countryman who owned a sailing cutter running between Cape Town and Langebaan. They loaded penguin eggs at the guano islands and collected mussel shells for the lime-burners. They also carried wheat, sheepskins and fish before the Saldanha railway line was built. Marra saved enough money to open a typical country general dealer's store in Langebaan and there he prospered. He reminded Frank of the captain of the Tremolino in Conrad's "Arrow of Gold". Marra had large feet and he always wore boots with pearl buttons. He was a controversial figure in Langebaan village, a man with a critical mind who seldom held conventional views.

He died in 1948. His family still own the store.

MERESTEYN

First of the treasure ships to sink in Saldanha waters was the Dutch East Indiaman *Meresteyn* very early in the eighteenth century. Many divers have clung to the seaweed on the barnacled timbers and surveyed the old cannon and cannon-balls spread about her on the sea-floor. Some of her money, some of her equipment, have been flung on the rocks of Jutten Island during winter gales. But the wreck lies in the path of swift currents and divers have never had much luck there. Coins, silver and a little gold, have been found in penguin burrows on the island. Frank Wightman examined these golden ducats bearing the figure of a horseman and the Philip IV ducatoons. Penguins are more at home

than human divers among the keel timbers of the *Meresteyn*. The headman on Jutten showed Frank where ten men of the *Meresteyn* were buried, for their graves are still recognisable in this kingdom of birds.

MILNER, SIR MORDAUNT

Sir Mordaunt Milner, born 1911, served in the Royal Artillery throughout World War II. He is the author of several novels and editor of the “South African Racehorse”.

MUIZENBERG

Muizenberg, one of the finest seaside and bathing resorts in South Africa, started as a fishing village at the end of the eighteenth century. Kimberley and other mining magnates discovered and developed the village during the eighteen-nineties. Cecil Rhodes died there in 1902.

OESTERVAL

Also spelt Oostenwal and Oosterval. First settled in 1727 and known early last century as the Residency. Early in the eighteenth century all the farms on the eastern shore of the lagoon belonged to a land baron named Hendrik Oostwald Eksteen who was also owner of the famous Tokai farm in the Cape Peninsula. It is possible that the name of the Oesterval farm was originally Oostwald; but Eksteen has been forgotten and the huge fossilised oyster bed near the farm may have been responsible for the present Oesterval. When the government post below Postberg was abandoned Oesterval became the official headquarters. Two rajahs from Ternate and Tidore, banished by the Batavian government, spent some time in exile at Oesterval late in the

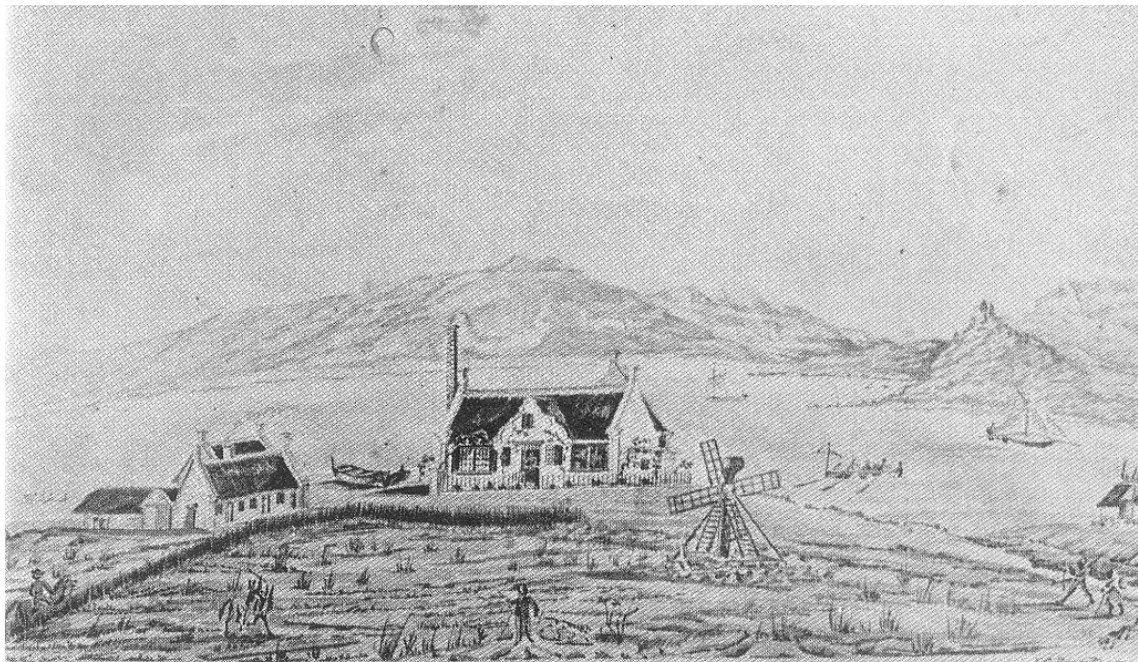
eighteenth century. Lord Charles Somerset is said to have built the present homestead during the eighteen-twenties; Oesterval would have been a paradise for a governor who was fond of shooting and Somerset also needed a discreet country residence for his love affairs. Close to Oesterval is the strongest spring of fresh water in the whole Saldanha area, a valuable asset where the rainfall is ten to fifteen inches a year. Here an American man-o'-war once took in ten thousand gallons within a few days. Oesterval was once the temporary home of the notorious William Parker, a former Mayor of Cork, leader of an Irish party of 1820 Settlers. Their two ships, *East Indian* and *Fanny*, put into Saldanha instead of Algoa Bay; and Parker decided to settle there and build a town called

New Cork. He had more than two hundred Irish Protestant followers, clerks and farm labourers, ex-soldiers and sailors. Most of them trekked away from Saldanha to try their luck at Clanwilliam, but Parker remained with a retinue of servants. He had private means, of course, and he set up his camp of tents and wagons near Hoedjies Bay, at the spot still marked on some maps as Parker's Town. Then he moved round to Oesterval and occupied a house owned by one John Pigott Watney. Some government buildings and land, including Schapen Island, were offered for sale and Parker bought the property. He embarked on his grandiose scheme for the city of New Cork, and soon he was carrying on a furious controversy with Colonel Bird, the colonial secretary. Parker, a quarrelsome man, blamed the

innocent Bird for all his set-backs; and when he discovered that Bird was a Roman Catholic he wrote to London complaining of a “Popish plot” against him. Meanwhile the owner of Oesterval, John Pigott Watney, became anxious to get rid of Parker. He had to land a small army of slaves at Oesterval, break open doors and windows and remove Parker’s goods before Parker retreated from the farm. Lord Charles Somerset was unwilling to have such a turbulent character as Parker in the colony and the sale of land at Saldanha was cancelled. Parker was compensated and sent back to Ireland while Saldanha relapsed into its usual tranquillity without seeing the city of New Cork arise on its shores. Perhaps it was a fortunate turn of fate. Captain G. Marsh was the official resident at Oesterval in the eighteen-

forties. He wished to make use of the grazing on Schapen Island for his sheep but was worried about the lack of water. An old Hottentot shepherd in his employ then showed him a secret spring which had been blocked up by the Dutch many years previously. Marsh removed a mass of blue clay, some heavy stones and the bones of a cow. A jet of excellent drinking water gushed up. Frank Wightman often filled his water tanks at that spring when he anchored at Schapen.

The Oesterval estate included Geelbek farm at the head of the lagoon last century. Geelbek has a fine gabled homestead built in 1860. Frank Wightman sometimes anchored *Wylo* near Geelbek. A stone beacon on the farm bears the VOC sign, insignia of the Dutch East India Company. It was placed there in 1785 by order of



Oesterval farm buildings in 1848, when M. Brink was the owner. (From the drawing by J. C. Poortermans.)

Governor Corneelis Jacob van der Graaff to mark the northern boundary of the Cape district.

Melt Brink, the early Afrikaans poet, spent eight years of his childhood at Oesterval in the middle of last century. His father owned the farm and Melt learnt wheat and cattle farming and fishing. There was no school but his father employed a Dutch shipwrecked sailor to teach Melt reading and writing.

The farm buildings were almost in ruins when Brian Lello and his partners bought the estate of about fifty acres. Today it stands with all its old charm, a stately home which has been visited and praised by members of the Simon van der Stel Foundation.

OUDE POST (See also: Lichtenstein, Dr. Martin)

Cornelis van Quaelbergen was the commander who set up a shore station at Saldanha soon after Van Riebeeck's departure. The camp was at the watering place on the western shore of the lagoon, the spot now known as Oude Post. Commander Borghorst, who followed, pulled down the French landmarks, the French coat-of-arms painted on boards attached to posts. One beacon had already been knocked down by a rhinoceros, while the Hottentots had used another for firewood. Then the French returned under Admiral de la Haye. Six ships entered the bay, finding only Sergeant Cruse and a few soldiers at the watering place. These men and the free traders were made prisoners, the Dutch flag came down and up went

the French insignia again. However, the French lost interest in Saldanha after that bloodless raid. For years the Dutch were able to grow their radishes, cress and peas without firing a shot.

Oude Post was raided by lions and sheep were carried off. Next morning the garrison commander heard the Hottentot servants screaming. The lions had returned and three head of cattle were killed. Soldiers chased the lions away but they came back to their meat and took it into the bush. Trap-guns were set, and that night one lion was shot. The other swam across the lagoon to Schapen Island, where it killed eight more sheep. Soon after this episode the Oude Post garrison was reduced to three. They were instructed to look out for foreign ships. If they were attacked they were to

abandon their post, set fire to the house and retire to the Cape overland.

Oude Post was already known by that name in the eighteen-twenties, when the American explorer and sealer Captain Benjamin Morrell brought his fast schooner Antarctic into the bay. There he patched his sails and spliced his ropes, filled his water casks at Oude Post and floated them back on the ebb tide. Oude Post still had a “guard house”, but a higher official, who was a justice of the Peace, was stationed at Oesterval; and there Morrell also found a small company of regular troops. Mail arrived twice a week from Cape Town. Cattle and horses, sheep and pigs were raised on the farm. “The wild beasts common to this country are gradually disappearing before the encroachments of man,” Morrell reported. “The lordly lion

retreats sullenly and indignantly before the image and likeness of his Maker and is seen only at respectful distances. The deserts, however, resound with the howling of wolves and the bellowing of hyenas.” Morrell was a seaman, not a naturalist. His wolves were jackals.

Postberg, the estate of the Oudepost Syndicate, was proclaimed a private nature reserve in 1969. It remains the property of the owners but falls under the protection of the Department of Nature Conservation. Birds in the reserve include ostriches and flamingos and the area is famous for spring flowers.

PIDGEON, HARRY

Skipper Harry Pidgeon (1872-1954) first reached Table Bay in March 1924. He spent two months under the

clock tower and then came an adventure that nearly ended his cruise. He sailed for St. Helena and fell asleep while trying to clear the land. His yacht was carried inshore and beached herself on the rocky coast to the north of Saldanha. However, she chose the only patch of sand in the area and was hauled off undamaged. Pidgeon sailed again about four months later. He reached his home port Los Angeles after an absence of four years. Only one man had sailed round the world alone at that time: Pidgeon’s fellow-countryman, Captain Joshua Slocum. Slocum was a professional seaman and so Pidgeon’s achievement was all the more remarkable. The Cruising Club of America awarded Pidgeon its Blue Water Medal. A lecture agency offered Pidgeon ten thousand dollars and expenses for a tour but he refused.

Between his world cruises Harry Pidgeon took part in an ocean race (New London to Bermuda) with two companions. *Islander* won and Pidgeon received a ship's clock as prize. He started his second voyage round the world in 1934 and reached Table Bay two years later. "Say I'm glad to be back," Pidgeon told me when I went on board. "I'm sixty-six but I feel like sixteen." He stayed for six months, happy as a child when old friends went on board *Islander* or took him into the country in their cars. Harry Pidgeon was a natural gentleman in the finest sense of the word and he made everyone feel better for meeting him.

Pidgeon reached Los Angeles again safely and remained there during World War II. In 1944, at the age of seventy-five, he married a Miss

Margaret Gardner and they lived on board *Islander*. Pidgeon had a slight stroke soon after the war ended, but this did not prevent him from setting out round the world for the third time with his wife. The old *Islander* made Hawaii after a severe battering. She went on to the New Hebrides and there she was wrecked. They salvaged most of their belongings and a new suit of sails. On their return to Los Angeles a host of friends raised the money for a new yawl similar to *Islander*. Harry Pidgeon lived on board with his wife until a few days before his death at the age of eighty-five.

PORTUGUESE MEN-O'-WAR

These large and rather mysterious organisms (*Physalia physalis*) reminded the old English seamen of Portuguese galleons and the nickname is used to this day. South African coast

resorts are invaded by them at intervals. In one day not long ago one thousand people were stung on the Durban beaches and some of the victims had to be treated in hospital.

ROBBEN ISLAND

Robben Island, meaning “island of seals”, was covered with seals when the first Portuguese explorers sailed into Table Bay. The island lies six miles from Table Bay breakwater, a low island often covered with fog. It is two miles long and a mile broad; and this little island has known much suffering, many shipwrecks and strange dramas. Captain Crosse and seven other condemned criminals from England were the first settlers. They were marooned early in the seventeenth century, when the English East India Company planned a settlement at the Cape. The island

became a penal settlement in Van Riebeeck’s time. Lepers and lunatics have been kept there. A garrison was stationed there during World War II and Frank Wightman was posted to the island during his naval service. He also made use of the small harbour when he was living on board *Wylo* after the war.

SALAMANDER BAY

Frank Wightman often anchored *Wylo* in Salamander Bay during holiday periods when he wished to escape from the crowds invading the lagoon. This bay lies just within the southern arm of Saldanha and provides good shelter. Van Riebeeck’s diary (November 4, 1655) states that the Dutch East India ship *Salamander* had called at Saldanha Bay “where they refreshed themselves so well with birds, eggs and vegetables that the

entire crew, many of whom had been ill in bed were completely restored to health". Salamander Bay was the haven used by the scurvy-stricken vessel.

The mail steamer Queen of the South anchored in Salamander Bay in September 1853, short of coal and water. The purser borrowed a horse from a farmer and rode to Cape Town for help. A passenger named William Rabone described the scene when the passengers landed. The veld was a perfect garden of wildflowers, the air rich with perfume. Singing birds rose with the sun; ants, beetles, butterflies and locusts were to be seen everywhere. Some passengers rambled in the bush, others shot buck on the mainland and rabbits on the islands. At lunchtime a huge tablecloth was spread and the stewards opened

hampers of wines, ale, beer, meat, pies, fowls and ham. Rabone said that he saw plants that were grown only in hothouses in England; euphorbias, orchids and geraniums. Crimson iceplants were in flower. Among the passengers was a German bishop who filled cases with mosses and beetles. Another passenger captured a young steenbok and took it back to the ship; others collected tortoises and green lizards. The saloon was decorated with large bouquets. Several days passed happily in this way until the S.S. Robert Peel came alongside with coal and provisions.

Camp Point, the southern headland of Salamander Bay, became a burial ground during the last three decades of the last century. Ship after ship arrived in Table Bay with smallpox on board. Cape Town had good reason to fear

the disease, for in one epidemic there had been more than a thousand victims; so this lovely bay was selected as a quarantine station. Patients and contacts lived on shore under canvas. The famous record-breaker Scot was among the liners confined in the bay. Camp Point was the camp of many who suffered there. When an old chimney stack was demolished in 1969 a ginger-ale bottle with a message was found embedded in the mortar. The letter read: "We, the undersigned officials of the quarantine camp at Saldanha Bay, together with these members of the crew of the S.S. *Scot* detained there whilst suffering from smallpox, send greeting." A long, humorous rhyme was signed by Dr. W. M. Russell, a surgeon named Falkiner and a number of seamen.

Apart from the smallpox graveyard there is another little cemetery at Salamander Bay with headstones going back for a century. A lad of nineteen who had fallen from aloft was buried by his shipmates of H.M.S. *Boadicea*. Seamen from Scotland, Norway, Denmark, England and West Africa rest under the decaying wooden crosses.

Carl Ellefsen, one of the Norwegian whaling pioneers at Saldanha, used Salamander Bay as his base early this century. He brought with him three catchers and several houses from Iceland; wood and iron houses that were taken to pieces and rebuilt at Salamander Bay. One of his whalers, the *Mosvalla*, left Table Bay in a gale after her captain had rejected advice from wise old seamen to remain in port. She was sighted off Vondeling,

but she never reached the whaling station. The fate of the *Mosvalla* was discussed for long afterwards, a minor *Waratah* mystery. Men searched the west coast, but a piece of grey-painted wood which may have belonged to a deckhouse in *Mosvalla* was the only discovery.

The iron clipper ship *Emily Faithfull* (later *Iron Queen* and then *H. C. Richards*) is still to be seen in the shallows of Salamander Bay. She was dismantled off the Cape, condemned and scuttled to form a jetty for the whaling station. Alongside the clipper lies the sunken hull of the old ketch *Forget-me-Not*; and in other parts of Salamander Bay are rusty steam whalers, aground and abandoned. They were the property of the late Sam Pettersen, a wealthy, eccentric, retired seafarer who collected ships as other

men collect old motor-cars. Pettersen had to pay thousands of pounds in port dues for other useless steamers lying in Durban harbour and Table Bay Docks. He left a fleet of ghost ships when he died. Frank Wightman once attempted to buy a length of anchor-chain from Sam Pettersen, but the price was too high. Pettersen hated parting with any item in his nautical museum and many relics are still to be seen round about Salamander Bay.

SALDANHA BAY

Probably the safest harbour in Africa, this huge bay lies on the Cape west coast sixty miles from Cape Town. Frank Wightman studied the discovery and naming of Saldanha Bay and found an element of mystery. Diaz never sighted Saldanha when he rounded the Cape. Vasco da Gama was only fourteen miles away when he

anchored in St. Helena Bay, and he would have set eyes on the great sheet of water if he had climbed a hill; but there is no record of such a discovery. Several well-known historians have stated that the Portuguese made no use of Saldanha Bay, but this is probably incorrect. Portuguese caravels were shallow-draught vessels, specially designed for sailing close inshore. There was a legend among other seafarers that only Portuguese ships could explore the coasts of Africa; and indeed these small handy ships could sail with or against the wind better than any other ocean-going ships in the world.

Antonio de Saldanha may or may not have entered the bay which now bears his name. He was the Castilian navigator who discovered Table Bay early in the sixteenth century and it is

probable that he sighted the wide Saldanha opening on his way down the coast. He climbed Table Mountain and got his bearings when he sighted the Cape of Good Hope from the summit. Thus he must have seen the Saldanha Bay hills as well. However, he was bound for India and sailed away after being ambushed by the Hottentots and wounded in the arm. Chart-makers marked Table Bay as “Agoada da Saldanha”, the watering place of Saldanha.

Three years after Saldanha came Captain Cyde Barbudo, a Portuguese mariner sent out to search the South African coastline for shipwrecked crews. He sailed as close inshore as he dared and could hardly have failed to observe the entrance to the present Saldanha Bay. Possibly he anchored there. The old Portuguese charts show

the North Head of Saldanha as Ponta da St. Lucia, and Barbudo may have been responsible for naming it. Such great navigators as the Portuguese could not have been unaware of the huge bay throughout the sixteenth century, when they dominated the Cape sea route. However, they left no known wrecks at Saldanha or a stone padrao such as they set up elsewhere. The sands have not yet revealed Portuguese rapiers or coins. Frank Wightman thought they buried some of their sailors there, however, for old maps show the significant name "Portugees Kerkhoven" on the northern shore of the bay. It is on record that Van Riebeeck first became interested in Saldanha because of a legend that the Portuguese had secured gold, amber and musk from the Hottentots. Wishful thinking, of

course, but Portuguese traders probably came away with other articles.

Saldanha Bay remained nameless and Table Bay was marked Saldanha Bay on the charts until early in the seventeenth century. Then Joris van Spilbergen is said to have entered the present Saldanha Bay under the impression that he had reached Table Bay. It seems that he discovered his error later, when he anchored under the unmistakable mass of Table Mountain; and he is said to have transferred the Saldanha name to the west coast bay, and named Table Bay to prevent mistakes in the future. Table Bay received far more ships than Saldanha, for the Saldanha Hottentots were unfriendly and the water sources gave only a trickle in comparison with the Table Valley

stream. France was the first nation to find wealth at Saldanha. For decades in the second half of the seventeenth century the French regarded Saldanha as their colony. Van Riebeeck heard a story about a French ship calling at Saldanha and shipping “furs and oil to the value of a ton of gold”. This report had rather more truth in it than had the Portuguese legend, though the value was greatly exaggerated. The first French expedition under Etienne de Flacourt approached Saldanha four years before Van Riebeeck founded the Cape settlement. De Flacourt remarked in his log that he knew the land was near when he saw kelp floating, seals and the white seabirds he called *margauts*. When he entered the harbour he anchored close to Meeuw Island marked as Isle au Cormorans on the French charts.

Nearby was a creek he named L’Anse des Flamens (now Riet Bay) because of the flamingos. De Flacourt’s ship grazed a rock at the lagoon entrance but escaped serious damage. He fired a cannon to notify the Hottentots of his arrival and sent eight soldiers to climb the mountain and search for water. They saw the tracks of elephant and leopards, zebra and oxen near a spring. The water, ten feet above sea level, was clear and bright. “A ship in this bay is sheltered from every wind as in a pond,” De Flacourt wrote. He said the bird islands were small, about the size of the Isle Louvier in the Seine. Elephants had reached the Isle au Cormorans at low tide and made it their home. He named Malagas Island the Isle de Sansy and killed seals and penguins there. Marcus Island he marked on his chart as Isle aux

Margaux, while Jutten was his Isle de Thomas Pan.

Hottentots came to the spring while De Flacourt was there and they gave him land tortoises, ostrich feathers and fresh meat in exchange for tobacco. "These savages are wretched folk with the air of vagrants," he wrote. De Flacourt lost one of his sailors, L'Ecluse by name, on Malagas; he was hurled against the rocks by the sea and killed, and so the first grave was dug on the island. The Frenchmen knocked down the gannets with sticks as the birds rose from their nests. "They are like European geese, and tasty as woodcock," De Flacourt declared. "The black cormorants, however, are not good to eat." Etienne de Flacourt returned to Saldanha seven years later. He noted the large number of whales and a dead hippo on

Schapen Island. One of the soldiers fired his musketoon at a rhinoceros at short range; the ball flattened on impact, but the smell of powder sent the rhino trotting away. "It moved faster than a man, however nimble, can run," said De Flacourt. More important than such zoological remarks was the interest De Flacourt showed in the Hottentots. He made a list of four hundred Hottentot words, including parts of the body. This was really the first dictionary, for the list of thirty-one words set down by the Englishman, Sir Thomas Herbert, earlier in the sixteenth century hardly warrants dictionary status.

Frank Wightman examined the old Saldanha charts in the Cape archives. He said that the earliest chart of all, a neat and fairly accurate drawing, revealed names which are still in use

today. Madegasen Island has become Malgas. Potter's Bay disappeared and became Hoedjies Bay; a pity, because Pieter Potter the surveyor, deserves to be remembered. Those old chart-makers, like their brethren all over the globe, used the names of ships and shipmates, animals and birds, and sometimes they drew on their imaginations. Lacus Bay, named after one of Potter's assistants, became Baviaansbaai in later years and is the present North Bay. They placed Vondeling Island on the chart. There the yacht De Voerman was wrecked a decade later; she was "completely shattered" after losing her anchors. Two small cannon and some of her cordage were saved.

Two naval encounters occurred at Saldanha towards the end of the eighteenth century. First the English

admiral Johnstone sailed in with his squadron under French colours and surprised six Dutch East Indiamen. When the Dutch captains found themselves under heavy fire they cut their cables and tried to run their ships ashore. Francois le Vaillant, the French naturalist, who was a guest of the Dutch, gave this account of the affair: "Disorder and confusion being spread in every quarter, the unfortunate vessels were abandoned to the most dreadful pillage, everyone endeavouring to carry off what he liked best. My captain set fire to his vessel, but the English arrived in time enough to prevent the rest from being run ashore and burnt. The fear of being pursued, taken or massacred by the enemy made the sailors, with the utmost precipitance, pursue their way to the Cape." Le Vaillant's ship was

the Middelburg. She was blown up and sank in six fathoms, touching the granite wall of Hoedjies Point. The chests of tea, the bales of cotton she carried have disintegrated. Beautiful china cups and saucers were brought up by divers and sold at Christie's in London. Frank saw her dark ribs sticking out of the white sand after all those years.

Still later in the century Admiral Lucas was trapped in Saldanha by the British fleet commanded by Elphinstone and the British land forces under General Craig. Elphinstone had eight powerful ships of the line, three frigates, two sloops and a brig. Lucas had his flagship Dordrecht and eight other ships; but some of his men were sick and many deserted. Lucas surrendered without firing a shot.

Saldanha saw more ships in the middle of last century than at any time before or since. They were nearly all British, schooners and other small craft, and they came soon after the value of guano as fertilizer had been discovered. At the height of the rush more than two hundred ships lay at anchor in the bay while their crews swarmed to the bird islands and fought over the guano. Those were wild and drunken days and there were many casualties. Skeletons found at Hoedjies Point not long ago belonged to the guano era.

SEALING

The islands of Saldanha were exploited by French sealers even before Van Riebeeck arrived at the Cape. The Dutch were anxious to learn the secrets of flaying and curing sealskins. Then four members of a

French expedition were marooned by their captain on one of the Saldanha islands because they had asked for more food. These men gave the Dutch “excellent instruction”. They said the sealskins were used in France for bandoliers, gloves, fine hats and boots.

During a December visit to Saldanha the men of the *Goede Hoop* encountered “an unbelievable multitude of seals on the rocks”, for it was the breeding season. Sealing was hard work, and four men of the galiot *Roode Vos* planned an escape to Angola or Brazil. They seized a quantity of tobacco, wine and food and left their skipper on one of the islands. However, the resourceful skipper made a raft, paddled across to the mainland and swam off to the galiot. The plotters rowed away in an open boat. One was drowned, another was

murdered by the Hottentots, and the two survivors were given long prison sentences.

SLOCUM, CAPTAIN JOSHUA

Captain Joshua Slocum, regarded by cruising yachtsmen as the greatest of all lone circumnavigators, was the first man to sail round the world alone. His book, “Sailing Alone Around the World”, is a classic. Slocum made the voyage in his little sloop *Spray* during the years 1895-98. He went on cruising and disappeared in 1909 at the age of sixty-five. The *Spray* was probably run down by a steamer at night.

SPEEDWELL

This five-ton sloop, which lay near Wylo in Kraal Bay from 1961 to 1963, was built in Hong Kong. Her sister ship, *Vertue Carina*, was owned by

Bruce Dalling of Atlantic race fame and was sailed by Dalling single-handed from Hong Kong to Durban. *Speedwell* was bought in England by a South African, John Goodwin, who sailed her to the Cape via the West Indies. Goodwin, a former skipper of the famous racing yacht *Stormvogel*, sailed from the Cape to the West Indies in 1970 in a trimaran with two men and a girl as crew.

STEENBRAS

This is a sea bream, the white species being caught along the Cape west coast. White steenbras run up to five feet in length and are popular fish with anglers. They are roasted, used in stews or fried in egg and breadcrumbs. The liver should not be eaten.

STRANDLOPERS

Strandlopers appear to have been the beachcombing forerunners of the Bushmen and Hottentots but their origin is controversial. Professor M. R. Drennan thought they were closely related to the Hottentots. Singer described a Strandloper skeleton from Buck Bay (south of Ysterfontein) as a female southern Bushman. Possibly the Strandlopers were a mixed race. They left the Saldanha area about the year 1700. Mr. Jalmar Rudner, a leading authority on Strandloper pottery, found small middens round about Kraal Bay. In the same neighbourhood an unusual pot came to light; it had a straight neck and tapered rim. It was similar to the Namaqualand pottery and Rudner thought it might have been left there by Namaquas who visited the Cape at the Van Riebeeck

period. Rudner declared that pottery among the Strandlopers went back a thousand years. He said it was a final addition to their material culture. Pots were probably used for rendering and storing fat rather than for cooking.

THOMAS, LLEWELLYN

Born in Cape Town in 1907. Joined the Royal Cape Yacht Club in 1922 and became a very successful helmsman. Wightman and Thomas were awarded the cup for the Outside Sailing Competition in 1933 after a number of cruises in *Lothair*. During World War II, Thomas joined the South African Navy and served in command of minesweepers. In 1953 Thomas was selected as skipper of *Tarpon*, the Royal Cape Yacht Club entry for the Lipton Cup races at Durban, and he brought the cup back to Cape Town for the first time in

forty-three years. He won the Lipton Cup again for the R.C.Y.C., with *Tarpon* in 1955. When Llewellyn Thomas married Ina Hennesey in 1940, Frank was always made welcome in their home. Over the years, the hospitality and friendship of the Thomas family, and later the Lello family, help to explain why the hermit of the lagoon was able to spend such long periods in solitude without breaking down. He knew there would always be a room for him at Innisfree at Milnerton or Oude Raapkraal at Retreat.

THUNBERG, DR. CARL PETER

Saldanha dreamed away most of the eighteenth century, but Frank Wightman glimpsed the life there in the seventeen-seventies through the writings of the great Swedish botanist Carl Peter Thunberg. During a spring

journey Thunberg stayed at the Company's post and collected specimens. "As in my way I frequently stopped to take up plants and put them in my handkerchief, I generally kept behind my companions, that I might not hinder their progress," he wrote. Saldanha farmers, he said, had neither vineyards nor much arable land, but plenty of cattle. They made butter every day in a churn like a pump; but the buttermilk, excellent though it was, they threw out to the calves and dogs. Homesteads were poorly furnished. The people were aware of local resources, however, making ink with the black juice of the cuttlefish mixed with vinegar, and poisoning hyenas with the seeds of a euphorbia. Thunberg found the people eating a bulb, the corm of an iris plant, which tasted like a potato when boiled. While

he was examining the shore he came across a leopard which had died after eating poisonous plants. Hottentots reckoned the New Year had arrived when certain *uintjies* pushed their way up through the veld. Round the bay grew the tall, straight and elegant stalks of the *Albuca major*, and the Hottentots chewed the succulent plant to quench their thirst. Among the medicines used by the people was the juice of the *melkdistel* or sow-thistle, which cleaned and healed ulcers.

Thunberg stayed for several days at the Company's Post. To his surprise he found there, serving as cook, one Eliseus Hypoff, son of a Stockholm bank director. Game was abundant at that time, wild duck and other birds and antelope. One of the Dutch soldiers went over to Vondeling Island to shoot a seal, for the skins were

made into shooting bags and tobacco pouches. He wounded a seal, and approached thinking it was dead. The seal caught his hand and bit off a thumb.

VAN RIEBEECK, JAN

Jan van Riebeeck, first Dutch governor of the Cape, had passed five months on the shores of Table Bay in 1652 when he ordered the little yacht *Goede Hoope* to explore Saldanha Bay and the islands. The object was “to see what could be done there for the profit of the Honourable Company in the way of trade or otherwise”. He had dazzling visions of such romantic merchandise as gold, ambergris, ivory and musk. His explorers carried tobacco, copper, bread-knives and razors for barter purposes. Skipper Simon Turver called first at Dassen Island, where he found signs of the

French sealing expeditions, huts made of whale skeletons covered with sealskins, the knives used by sealers and a grave with a cross. Here the men of *Goede Hoope* loaded twelve thousand penguin eggs and killed some dassies for the pot. “I do declare never to have eaten better meat in my life,” reported the expedition’s diarist. “It is as delicate of taste, pure and tender of flesh, as the finest lamb, no hare or rabbit being comparable to it.” Before long Saldanha and the island were to become larders for the Table Valley garrison. When the worried Commander was unable “to fill the hungry bellies” of his garrison he sent to Saldanha for birds and fish. On this first voyage the *Goede Hoope* loaded more than two thousand sealskins, cleverly prepared and left by the French on Schapen Island. Saldanha

also provided Van Riebeeck's settlement with thatching reeds. One sloop carried nine hundred bundles. Salt from the Saldanha pans was another export. The skipper of the Goode Hoope and others landed on Meeuw Island, finding it overgrown with a bitter plant like asparagus. They saw snakes and brought away a tortoise. On the mainland they filled holes in the rocks with salt water, and when it had evaporated they salted the harders they had netted. Hottentots supplied them with rhebok and steenbok, hippo tusks and ostrich feathers in exchange for copper wire.

Ships were careened safely at Saldanha. When the galiot *Parkijt* was sent there to be scraped the skipper was told to see whether he could make reasonable catches of fish, to salt the harders and bring back other species

alive by towing them in a tank. "Soles, plaice, flounders and haddock" were mentioned. "On your trip you shall also collect some oysters, which are found far towards the shore in the mud channel," Van Riebeeck wrote. "These can be brought here in good condition by putting them in kegs."

VELSKOENE

Velskoene are skin shoes, and the *veldskoene* spelling is incorrect. Before the white man reached the Cape the Hottentots were cutting shoes out of raw, undried hide and fitting them to their feet in single pieces. Modern velskoene are made with soles and uppers cut separately and sewn together.

WALMSLEY, CAPTAIN MATTHEW

Captain Walmsley, master of the *Birkdale* during Frank Wightman's

passage from Table Bay to Newcastle, N.S.W., was in command of the ship from 1911 until he was dismissed in 1922. Late in December 1918, Walmsley rescued the crew of the Nova Scotia schooner *Jane Cox* in the North Atlantic. Walmsley was beating up to St. John's, New Brunswick, in a gale soon after the rescue with only a goose-winged main lower topsail set and a weather cloth in the mizzen rigging. Even this was too much for her. She lay with her lee rail right under, the sea up to her lee hatch coamings. Then a heavy squall blew up. All hands were hoping it would carry away the lower topsail and thus relieve the pressure. The squall blew harder than ever and Walmsley expected to see the masts go over the side at any moment. With the *Birkdale* lying in the trough of the sea it would

have been impossible for anyone to make his way forward and cut the topsail sheet; yet the sheet had to go or the ship might have been lost. Indeed, the crew of the *Jane Cox* thought they had been saved from drowning only to face death once more. In this extremity Walmsley fetched his revolver and fired again and again at the lee clew of the topsail until he had riddled it. Then it blew out of the bolt-ropes. It was just as well for the *Birkdale* was lying so far over that the seas were hitting her under the weather bilge and almost capsizing her. A lull came at last and they were able to get the *Birkdale* off before the wind with "double-O" canvas forestaysail set. They made Queenstown in Ireland instead of Canada. Captain Walmsley died at Hoedjies Bay early in World War II.

WIGHTMAN, CECIL (1901-1965)

A deep interest in voices and sounds ran in the Wightman family. Frank Wightman's cousin Cecil was for years a popular broadcaster and the most skilful mimic in South Africa. He started the famous "Snoektown Calling" programme announced each week by the quavering call of the fish horn. The "craziest radio station south of the line" first came on the air in 1935 and before long listeners became acquainted with such characters as Mr. Bagasie-Wa of the railways, Tony the Chef, Frikkie the Maestro and many others. Cecil Wightman wrote every line of the script himself and often assumed nine different voices in one programme.

WIGHTMAN, FRANK ARMSTRONG (1896-1970)

Born in Johannesburg, Transvaal Republic, on November 23, 1896. Second son of James Wightman of Lockerbie, Scotland, and Caroline, daughter of the Rev. J. P. Thomson. Educated at Berkhamsted grammar school, near London 1908-1913. Attended lectures at the London School of Economics. Joined the Western Telegraph Company in 1915. Posted to Madeira in April 1916, to St. Vincent later and to various cable stations in South America until he left the service in 1920. He then returned to South Africa. Sailed from Table Bay in August 1921 as a deckhand in the full-rigged ship *Birkdale*. On his return to South Africa he worked for a time in the Belgian Congo. Between the years 1922 and 1932 he was in

business in Cape Town with his father. He built the yawl *Wylo* in 1938 and made Saldanha Bay his home. In 1940 he moored *Wylo* in Kraal Bay, part of the lagoon. He joined the South African Navy in 1943 and served until a few months after World War II ended. Then he lived on board *Wylo* again until he sailed for the West Indies in January 1947. Later that year he reached Trinidad and sold *Wylo*. He then returned to Cape Town and wrote his first book, "The Wind is Free". He recovered *Wylo* in 1949 and sailed on, alone most of the time, from Trinidad to Baltimore, U.S.A. The yacht was shipped back to Cape Town on the deck of a freighter in January 1950 and Frank Wightman took her back to Kraal Bay. He wrote his second book "*Wylo* Sails Again". Kraal Bay was his home until he sold *Wylo* in March

1965, so that he had spent a total period of about twenty years alone on the lagoon. He lived in Cape Town for eleven months in 1965-66 and returned to Oesterval on the lagoon in February 1966. He died in a Cape Town hospital on February 23, 1970, and was cremated a few days later. His sister Catharine and her husband Major-General S. Garlake, former Commander-in-Chief, Rhodesia, were the chief mourners. Another sister, Mrs Glen Broad, was in Salisbury, Rhodesia, and was unable to attend the cremation. In the front pew sat Mr. and Mrs Llewellyn Thomas and Mr. and Mrs Brian Lello. Frank Wightman's ashes were buried in the old family graveyard at Oesterval; and there Brian Lello set up a simple memorial, a weathered granite slab from the veld bearing a bronze plate

engraved with an impression of *Wylo* in the trade winds.

The “Cape Times” obituary notice, written by Brian Lello, described Frank Wightman as the recluse who was South Africa’s least-seen yachtsman. Lello declared: “Others have voyaged farther and some faster, but none with such an understanding for sail ... His respect for the way of a ship was matched only by his feeling for English. He never regarded himself as a professional writer and hundreds of pages of manuscript have burnt on the beach in his fits of self-criticism.”

Frank Robb, author and sailor, in a tribute in “South African Yachting”, wrote: “A hermit? Certainly. A, surly, selfish misanthrope? Who casts that stone? I can at least bear witness to his extra-ordinary range of interests and knowledge and to a sensitive - and

easily hurt - soul beneath the hard-case crust ... This is how I like to remember Frank Wightman - *Wylo* deep-reefed, reaching out into the dark stormy night and the open ocean, and a small figure at the helm, sure of his boat, confident in his skill, sailing out to fight the devil and the deep blue sea. Frank Wightman, author and yachtsman - man of words and deeds.”

WOOD, DR. J. BURN

One of the doctors who went to the rescue when Frank Wightman broke his leg at Dassen Island was that grand old man of the sea Dr. J. Burn Wood. He had served as a military doctor in the South African War and the Zululand rebellion and went to sea as a ship’s surgeon during World War I. With his son Gordon and daughter Dorothy he sailed in Redwing dinghy races on Table Bay and later he owned

a twenty-five foot sloop. Dr. Burn Wood served at sea again in World War II. He was in the Dunedin Star, wrecked on “Skeleton Coast” in 1942 and spent three weeks on the beach, the oldest of the party. He treated the three babies and other sufferers with medicines dropped from the air. Dr. Burn Wood remained at sea for some years after the war and died in 1967 at the age of ninety-four.

WYLO

She is an ugly cow with her enormous cabin top and angular hull. Thirty-four feet overall, *Wylo* is just about as large as one man could handle without the post-war gadgets that aided Sir Francis Chichester and Bruce Dalling. The original design appeared in the American yachting magazine “Rudder” during World War I and the lines were based on those of a smaller

boat in which Captain Thomas Day had crossed the Atlantic.

Harry Pidgeon and many others had proved the soundness of this design (called *Seagoer*) long before Frank Wightman built *Wylo*. The yacht was supposed to be easy for amateur carpenters to build as she had a V-bottom and flat sides. No bent or steamed frames were used in the shallow hull. This “deadrise” or “sharpie” design gave the boat awkward angles at bow and stern. Maurice Griffiths, the British designer, pointed out that the “double rabbets” (or plank insets) of the two chines were difficult to cut and fit. The joints along the chines worked and often leaked in a seaway, as Frank Wightman discovered. “A badly-proportioned V-bottom boat can be an uncontrollable bitch,” Maurice

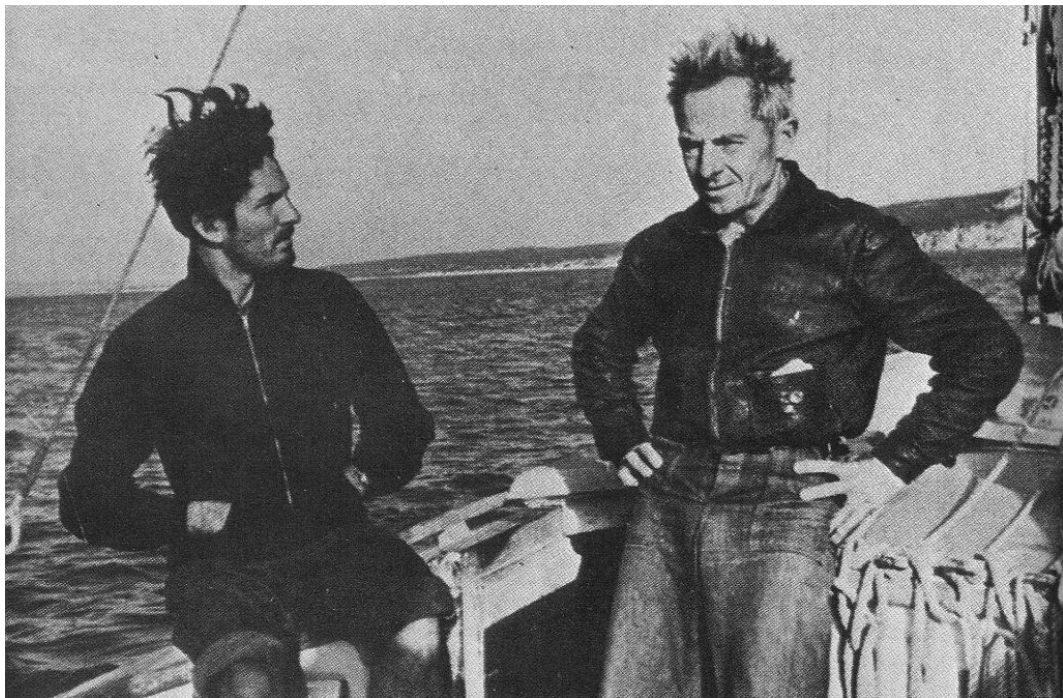
Griffiths declared. "However, a well-designed V-bottom can be just as good a sea boat as a well-designed round-bilge sister ship." That great circumnavigator J. C. Voss had a yacht of this type named Sea Queen and she rolled over completely in a typhoon without sinking.

Frank Wightman found *Wylo* roomy enough and he could walk about the cabin without bending his neck. He departed from the Seagoer-Islander design when he built the cabin, for he took the cabin beams right out to the planking and eliminated the side decks. The effect was to make *Wylo* look uglier than ever, rather like a low houseboat under sail; but it gave her additional strength and comfort. *Wylo* had a beam of ten feet nine inches and drew five feet of water without stores or gear. She was yawl-rigged with a

full sail area of six hundred and thirty square feet.

YOUNG, GRAHAM.

Graham Young was born in England in 1919 and settled in South Africa a few years before World War II. He watched Frank Wightman building *Wylo* and arranged to sail with him on the cruise. Graham Young worked in South Africa as a photographer on the State Information Office staff and rejoined this service when he reached the United States. Later he made a number of television films in East Africa, the United States, Europe and elsewhere and voyaged under sail in full-rigged ships as a cinematographer. He became a portrait artist in New York in recent years and also worked in a book and magazine publishing house. Graham Young revisited South Africa in 1954 and 1969. His ambition



Graham Young (left) and Frank Wightman - a reunion on board *Wylo* on the lagoon in 1954. (Photo: David van Heerden.)

is to retire to a cottage on the shores of the lagoon where he lived on board *Wylo*.

YSTERFONTEIN

Ysterfontein cove has been the little mainland harbour at which shipwrecked people, castaways, runaways and others have landed from Dassen Island in various emergencies. Sailing cutters loaded salt at Ysterfontein not only in the Dutch Company's days, but until a road was made through the coastal dunes. Remnants of the trolley-line and jetty built early this century are still to be seen. The salt pan near Ysterfontein was formed when dunes shut off an arm of the sea. It is really a shallow basin in which salt has been deposited by evaporation. This is the finest salt in the Cape. Thousands of sacks are sent away by road and train in a good

season, but the old salt harbour at Ysterfontein is no longer a port of call.

Ysterfontein was a cattle farm in 1729 but it was not until 1820 that the present homestead was built. Ganzekraal in this neighbourhood had a much older homestead, probably of the seventeen-thirties; a grand place with huge rooms, high ceilings and yellow wood floors. It was burnt down a few years ago, when a whirlwind blew sparks on to the thatch. The wagon track from Table Bay past Ysterfontein to Saldanha touched farms once owned by famous men. Jacob van Reenen who led an expedition in search of Grosvenor survivors, lived here; and he was followed early last century by Francis Dashwood, a high British official who entertained Lord Charles Somerset. Seven miles to the east of Ysterfontein

boulder shaped like a snake's head) where in 1843 two brothers named Versfeld settled. Mr. Martin ("Tinie") Versfeld, a grandson, talked to Frank Wightman of Ysterfontein, where he lived when he retired from Slangkop. As a child "Tinie" Versfeld used to go there with his parents by ox-wagon. The sand between the farm and the coast was so heavy that only a wagon could penetrate the dunes and the journey of seven miles lasted three hours. The only houses at Ysterfontein towards the end of last century, and for years this century were the farm homestead about a mile from the beach and a cottage near the sea. A thatched building known as Vis Huis was used for drying fish. Several farmers along that coast kept eight-oared open fishing boats, and the

crews manned them during the snoeking season.

Six hundred yards to the north of Ysterfontein Point there is a tiny islet or rock, thirty-four feet high, known as Meeuwklip or Yzerklip, where seabirds roost. Frank often sailed *Wylo* past this seamark. Versfeld's grandfather leased the rock from the government, paying two pounds a year and gathering as much as fifty tons of valuable guano. He took the men out each day in calm weather towards the end of the summer and returned for them in the evening. They were provided with food and water for the day. The men worked fast, scraping the rock and filling their sacks while the good weather lasted; for Meeuwklip lies in an exposed position and huge seas break over it during north-west gales. One evening wind

and sea rose suddenly and Versfeld realised to his horror that he would be unable to take the boat out to the rock. Day after day the seas crashed on Ysterfontein beach, making it impossible for the boat to be launched. Day after day the thirsty men on Meeuwklip signalled desperately for help. They were living on shellfish and making their bottles of water last as long as possible. After nearly a week Versfeld was able to rescue them; but those men never went back to Meeuwklip. Their ordeal is still remembered by the people along the coast, and often the rich guano remains untouched on the rock until it is washed into the ocean by the winter gales.

Naturally the cottages of Ysterfontein village have their relics of shipwrecks, their flotsam and curios from the

ocean. Frank Wightman declared that the first deep-sea vessel to be lost on this stretch of coast was the Dutch East India Company's ship *Reygersdal*. She was bound from Holland to Table Bay and had been four and a half months at sea on October, 14, 1747, when Dassen Island was sighted at last. By that time one hundred and twenty-five victims of scurvy had been buried at sea; eighty-three of the survivors were so ill that they could not leave their hammocks; and the handful of fit men could not work the ship. They steered for Saldanha but missed the entrance and lumbered southwards out of control. While they were drifting off Dassen Island the captain sent a boat to the shore and secured a little fresh food, rabbits, game birds and fish; but not enough to restore the stricken crew

to health. However, the men on deck made a last, tremendous effort and managed to beat up against a hard south-easter to Robben Island. There they anchored but the hawser broke and the *Reygersdal* was driven northwards by the gale. "Breakers ahead" called a man on the fo'c'stle. When the captain realised that the ship was about to run aground he ordered the sick men to be brought on deck. He tried to claw off the shore but his crew were too weak to handle the sails. It was at daybreak on October 25 that the *Reygersdal* struck the coast. Twenty men launched a boat and reached the shore, taking the log-book but leaving the captain on board. They hoped to rescue some of their shipmates by carrying a lifeline between ship and shore; but the *Reygersdal* broke up almost

immediately, and only four of those on board were saved. The exact position of the wreck was not recorded at the time. Theal said the *Reygersdal* was lost "between Dassen and Robben Island". There may be treasure under the sand to the south of Ysterfontein, for only one of the chests with money-bags was recovered by the expedition sent from the Castle to the wreck. Some years after World War II Frank saw the keel timbers of an old wooden ship exposed during a very low tide. The length was about one hundred and fifty feet. Was it the *Reygersdal*? Frank was sure that he had gazed upon the bones of the old Dutch ship.

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Hottentots
Illness (Frank Wightman)
Isobel (nursemaid)
Jackals
Kraal Bay
Lagoon food
Lagoon people
Lagoon year
Langebaan
Lawrence of Arabia

Brian **Lello**
Dr. Martin **Lichtenstein**
Little Vondeling
George Albert **Lloyd**
Loch Torridon (barque)
Lulu (yacht)
Lynx
Madeira
Mamba
Mammoths
S.S. Marathon
J. **Marra**
Merestyn (wreck)
Sir Mordaunt **Milner**
Montevideo
Muizenberg
Navigation
Oesterval
Ostriches
Oude Post

Oysters
Para
Penguins
Pernambuco
Skipper Harry **Pidgeon**
Portuguese men-o'war
Rio de Janeiro
Frank **Robb**
Robben Island
Salamander Bay
Saldanha Bay
Saldanha skull
Saldanha, (Archaeology)
Schryver's Hoek
Scorpions
Sealing
Jasper **Segallas**
Shearwaters
Sixteen Mile Beach
Captain Joshua **Slocum**

Dr. G. J. **Smit**

Snakes

Snoek

South America

Speedwell (yacht)

Spring on lagoon

St. Helena

Steenbras

Stingray

Stoffbergsfontein

Strandlopers

Summer on lagoon

Llewellyn **Thomas**

John **Thornton**

Carl Peter **Thunberg**

Tides

Tortoises

Trinidad

Umhlanga

Mr. Beauclerk **Upington**

Jan **Van Riebeeck**

Velskoene

Vondeling Island

Captain Matthew **Walmsley**

Waratah

West Indies

Cecil **Wightman**

Douglas **Wightman**

F. A. **Wightman** (summary of life)

James **Wightman**

Mrs C. **Wightman**

Wild life of lagoon

Wildflowers

Winter on lagoon

Dr. J. Burn **Wood**

Wylo (yacht)

Graham **Young**

Ysterfontein